

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

# The House of Many Worlds

SAM MERWIN, jr.

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*A Full Length Galaxy Science Fiction Novel*

# The HOUSE of MANY WORLDS

By SAM MERWIN, Jr.

When **Picture Week** writer Miss Elspeth Marriner and photographer Mack Fraser visited the mysterious old house on Spindrift Key, in the Hatteras country, a supposedly routine story assignment turned suddenly into a fantastic adventure.

For this house was actually a tangential point, or multiple gateway, to several worlds—worlds like our own, but varying slightly where similar crises and catastrophes in history had been resolved differently.

Elspeth and Mack learned that they had been brought here purposely, to help in an emergency which threatened the entire North American continent with war. They were to be used as secret agents of "The Workers," whose duty it was to look after the Earth in all its many parallel courses.

Crossing into another world, aided only by their native ingenuity and the assistance of a fellow agent, the beauteous and knowable Juana, they encountered a succession of plots and counterplots, near brushes with death, and even romance. And before they completed their mission, they had to visit still a third world, where both tragedy and happiness awaited them.

An exciting, modern science fiction story, with a new and highly unusual twist, THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS is outstanding for its realistic characters and expert seasoning of thrills and humor.

**T H E**

**H O U S E**

**O F M A N Y**

**W O R L D S**

Three parallel diagonal lines, slanted from the upper left towards the lower right, positioned to the left of the text.

# THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS

by Sam Merwin, Jr.

**A fast moving Science Fiction Novel; filled  
with tension, intrigue and romance.**

**A Complete Science Fiction Novel**

**GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP.  
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New York 14, N.Y.**

**GALAXY Science Fiction** Novels, selected by the editors of **GALAXY Science Fiction Magazine**, are the choice of science fiction novels both original and reprint.

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The characters, the location, and the incidents in this book are entirely the product of the author's imagination and have no relation to any person or event in real life.

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## CHAPTER ONE

**E**LSPETH MARRINER fingered the sticky surface of the thick tumbler on the gimpy-legged table and wondered what in hell she was doing in the dingy little restaurant. As a poetess, she reminded herself, it was her duty to have her feet in the mire as well as her head in the clouds—but this was going a little too far. Besides, the night sky outside was cloudless.

Seeking to screen out Mack's insistent and unsubtle prodding of the leather-skinned native he was plying with the hot and heavy liquid molasses that passed for rum in this incredibly backward little Carolina community, she concentrated on the strip of pale amber flypaper that dangled from the ceiling, which was less than six feet above her head.

At regular intervals the curved planes of its spiral surface glistened menacingly in the dim reflection of the green-shaded lamp that dangled beyond it from a dark-brown cord. Less regularly trapped insects buzzed hysterical protest at such unmannerly death as faced them. She counted the flies she could see imbedded in its sticky surface. There were exactly fourteen, five more than had been present the night before. It was these five that were buzzing—the others were still.

Fourteen, she thought. Fourteen—the magic number that spelled sonnet. She began mentally to frame a sonnet to fourteen wretched flies, caught in a spiral of flypaper, five alive, nine dead. Surely even such unpleasant creatures merited some sort of memorial to their passing.

She lost the thread of her verse in the midst of a couplet—and her rhyme scheme with it. Her head was aching dully, just in back of her temples, either from lack of sleep in the course of the assignment or from the soggy fried food which was all this Carolina township had to offer, or from the drink and a half of blackstrap rum she had just consumed. Or perhaps her headache was the result of a combination of all three. If Mack didn't get her back to New York on the morrow she would . . .

She glanced covertly at the photographer, who was leaning on the soiled oilcloth table cover as if eager to absorb every illiterate word of the native's half-drunken blather. It would be pleasant, she thought, to do something that would wipe the conscientious eagerness from his too-hard too-old too-young gladiator's face. According to Orrin Lewis,

the tough-fibered smooth-talking managing editor of *Picture Week*, who had teamed them for the Hatteras Keys assignment, Mack Fraser had once been a professional prize-fighter. Elspeth believed him.

Mack's nose was slightly flattened across the bridge, its end a trifle off center. His cheekbones were not quite symmetrical, as if one—the left one—had been shattered by a fist. His eyes habitually wore a sleepy look which, she suspected, came from the thin pouches of scar tissue on their upper lids.

She told herself sternly that she was being a snob, that she had no right to object to the fact that Mack had once made a living in the ring. But she could not help resenting the fact that he seemed determined to treat her as if, merely because she had not had to struggle out of some similar gutter, she did not quite belong to the human race.

"... and I'm telling you, Mack," the native said in his soft brogue as the photographer signaled the bar for a refill, "that there's still some mighty odd things happening around here from time to time." He paused, and the Adam's apple vibrated beneath the scaly red skin of his turkey neck. "We don't make much talk of it to outsiders as a rule." He paused again to chuckle and even sounded like a turkey. "Matter of fact, we don't make much talk of it among ourselves."

"What sort of odd things?" Mack asked quietly. He was leaning back in his chair now, apparently disinterested, since his fish was nibbling at the bait. Elspeth winced, thinking the pumping process painfully obvious. If she were Corey, or whatever the native's name was ... But of course she wasn't.

Lacking a waiter, the bartender himself, a large lame individual with faded blue eyes and thick gray hair on the backs of his fingers, brought drinks over to the two men. Corey nodded and numbed his thanks and lifted his fresh glass to Elspeth who managed what she hoped was a smile as he downed half its contents at a single gulp. She shuddered at the sight, feeling as though *she* had drunk it, but on Corey it had no visible effect.

"It's like this," Corey went on, planting his forearms on the table after wiping his mouth with one dirty blue sleeve. "It goes a long long ways—some say to the bankers, and maybe even beyond."

"I've heard of *them*," said Elspeth, deciding she ought to say something in return for the courtesy of Corey's toast. "They used to do things to the beacon lights to force ships ashore on the Hatteras shoals and then loot them. Nice people!"

"That they weren't," said Corey, apparently taking her last two words literally. "And they did worse than loot. Some say they slew ten thousand men—aye, and women and little children. They could not afford to let any of them live."

"But what's this funny stuff—these 'odd things' you were starting to tell us about?" said Mack. His voice, Elspeth decided, was not actually bad. But it was rough around the edges, unfired for subtlety or fine shades of meaning. On the whole it went well with its owner.

"Some nights the lights still shine," said Corey, placing his gnarled and brine-cracked lobster-pot hands flat on the oilcloth table top. His voice dropped a full half octave. "And when the lights are seen things happen. Other times there's darkness—darkness not even the stars can shine through when there's not a cloud in the sky. And that's worse."

"Not so fast, Corey," said Mack, his low forehead furrowed. "You say 'things happen' when these lights are seen. What sort of things?"

"Big things—bad things," the native said slowly, painfully seeking his words. "Things like wars and earthquakes and troubles to match. Times we don't get to hear of them until a long while after. But we know when they happen."

"And, Corey, why is this darkness you talk about worse?" Mack inquired, again leaning forward.

Corey hesitated and scratched his unkempt coarse black hair. He looked around the restaurant a trifle furtively and then leaned toward both of them, his voice low and hoarse as he said, "It's difficult to explain—but it is. You've got to see it when it happens to understand what I mean."

"You mean the whole locality—the entire area here—just blacks out?" Elspeth asked incredulously. Although their assignments—to come up with a romantic picture story about the Hatteras Keys and their inhabitants—had been a notable fizzle to date, she was in no mood for haunts.

"Not so you'd notice, miss," said Corey, regarding her as if she were a toddler who had failed to pass a first-grade test. "What I've been telling you is that Spindrift Key is the place."

He paused and Mack cut in with, "I think I know. Let's see, that would be the island just beyond the mouth of the inlet." He looked thoughtful, added, "I'm afraid it's too well groomed—too clipped



looking—for this story we've been sent out on. Do you mean to tell me that——"

"What I mean to say is that's where these things happen I've been trying to tell you about," the native said, drawing himself up with a trace of dignified affront. Then, glancing down at his glass, which was again empty, he dropped his dignity and added earnestly, "Listen, you people may be outsiders but you've been mighty decent to me—mighty decent. I wouldn't tell you no lies, not so you'd notice it. I know what I know, Mack."

"But the place can't be haunted," Mack protested solemnly. "Hell. I cruised all around it yesterday with Elspeth here on our way to the outer shoals. It looks like a Southdown manor compared to the rest of these desolate places. And that big white house on it is well kept up. The lawns are clipped and the shrubbery——"

"Didn't say it was haunted," stated Corey, looking hopefully at his glass. "All I told you was that Spindrift Key is where things happened. It's where they've always happened."

"But somebody must live there," Mack said steadfastly. "The place is too well kept up."

"Didn't say nobody lived there neither," Corey told them. "The Frenchman lives there—him and his people. Always have lived there. as far as we know around here."

"Frenchman?" inquired Elspeth, more to keep from falling asleep than to contribute to the conversation. She was totally and desperately tired. Three days of traipsing to and around this rough-hewn primitive Carolina country with Mack were enough, she thought, to put any girl on the ropes.

"He's a foreigner anyway. And he's got a French sort of name—Horelle," said Corey.

Mack flashed Elspeth a quick, speculative look. Then, turning back to the native, he said, "Sounds like it might be worth a visit. Do you think this Horelle might be in tomorrow?"

"I can't tell about that," said Corey with a massive shrug. "Sometimes he's there—sometimes he ain't."

"But, Mack," said Elspeth in horror, "tomorrow we've got to get back to New——"

"But someone's got to be there," said Mack, as if she hadn't spoken at all. "A big place like that."

"I can't very well tell about that either," drawled the native.

"Around here we leave the Spindrift Key folk pretty much to themselves. Always have. It suits them fine and suits us likewise. But there's times when the Key is just empty ground."

Mack straightened in his chair and looked briefly at the watch on his wrist. "It's only a little after nine," he told them. "Could you get us out there tonight, Corey?"

"Maybe I could," said Corey in a tone of deep reluctance. "It's a fact Horelle don't like visitors dropping in unexpected-like. I hear tell he's downright discouraging."

"Mack!" Elspeth said sharply. "I'm beat." They had risen at quarter of five that morning so that Mack could get shots of the sunrise over the keys.

"It's a story—maybe. And we're in no spot to pass one up," Mack told her firmly. The photographer was not to be denied.

To her considerable surprise and even greater disgruntlement, Elspeth found herself, nine minutes and a final drink later, standing with Mack outside the dingy little restaurant in the virtually unpaved main street of the little Carolina coastal town. Despite the fact that it was still early in the evening it appeared that most of the denizens had already gone to bed.

"No wonder they seem to have so many children," she murmured half to herself. "They have nothing else to do nights."

"Shut up," Mack said bluntly. "It's rough enough trying to get next to any of these natives without your insulting them. And if you hadn't run the Pipit into that ditch today we wouldn't have to have Corey take us out there."

"I said I was sorry," Elspeth replied irritably. She was sick of feeling like an inept and absent-minded idiot. Nor did it bolster her sagging ego that Mack's trim and gleaming little English-made vehicle was reposing in the town's one garage, thanks to a driving lapse on her part. She had spotted a flock of bright red cardinals while guiding the Pipit along a high-crowned country lane as Mack scouted the landscape for pictures. In the resultant slip from road to ditch she had managed to get the front wheels thoroughly out of line.

"I only hope whatever passes for a mechanic in this alleged town doesn't finish the butchery," Mack added unkindly. It was like him, Elspeth thought, to worry over a gadget like the Pipit. He was exactly the same about caring for his cameras. He was forever fussing with them, oiling them, testing them, taking them apart and putting them

back together again. Elspeth, whose entire nature and interest lay in form, in people, in ideas and passion and the emotional responses they aroused, had a certain contempt for all machines. They were so—coldly tangible.

"Lord, I'm sleepy!" she said, and let herself yawn widely, making no attempt to cover it.

"My God, after the way you've been beefing about the beds at the local hostelry!" said Mack, and his white teeth gleamed in the starlit darkness as he grinned at her. "I should think you'd be grateful to me for giving you a chance to stay out of them for an extra hour or two. Women!"

"Your logic," said Elspeth icily. "leaves me frigid."

"Just as it found you. eh?" Mack chuckled.

Mercifully for their continued existence as a writer-photographer team, Corey loomed up out of the shadows of the ill-lit street before Elspeth could frame a suitably pungent reply. The native was rolling a bit as he came toward them, but Elspeth decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and put his unsteady gait down to his years on a fishing-boat deck rather than to the rum he had just consumed.

"That is all a bit daft," he remarked as he led them toward the shimmer of white moonlight on the water beyond the small quay at the far end of the street. "Still, you folk have been more than decent to me. If it'll give you any benefit I'm glad to be of service. Look out for the steps just ahead."

"Thanks, Corey," said Mack. He paused to negotiate the irregular steps down onto the quay, leaving Elspeth to manage for herself. Then, fingering the case of the infra-red camera which hung from a strap over his shoulder, "We'll be more than glad——"

"We wouldn't want to miss a moonlight trip on the water for anything," said Elspeth quickly, gaining the quay without stumbling. She sensed by his tone that Mack was about to offer their guide money—and that Corey would be hurt beyond words if he did. By way of emphasizing her point, she jabbed an elbow into the photographer's short ribs.

"Dammit—be careful!" cried Mack. He glared at her in the moonlight and Corey stopped in front of them, glanced back with evident concern. Mack finally caught on and, to her relief, added, "Sorry. I must have stepped in a pothole or something."

"Gotta watch your step in these parts, Mack," said the fisherman

earnestly. " 'S tricky walking after dark."

His boat was tied to one side of the quay and the water lapped gently at its side. The moonlight did not hide its lack of paint and all-around battered condition. It smelled of stale machine oil and long-dead fish. Elspeth, who had considerable native grace for a tall girl, managed to scramble safely aboard and find a seat near the stern, across the cockpit from Mack, who was already seated and smoking a fresh cigarette.

"Light one for me, will you?" she asked. Illogically and in spite of the fact that she prided herself on an ability to deal with men on equal terms, she felt irritation at his not having offered her one unasked. Mack complied casually and reached across the cockpit to hand it to her without rising, thus forcing her to reach too. He was, she decided, a thorough-going boor.

At that moment Corey, who had been working quietly in the bilge, got the big flywheel spinning and the motor sputtered abruptly to life, seeming to shred the entire peacefulness of their surroundings with its sharp barking sounds. It coughed and sighed briefly, then caught and subsided under the fisherman's expert handling to a steady thrum. Corey cast off and they putt-putted out across the dappled moonlight that seemed to dance like a will-o'-the-wisp in front of them.

"That Spindrift on our port bow?" Mack inquired less than five minutes later. Corey denied it and offered the information that they would not lay eyes on their destination until they had rounded the black point that lay just ahead.

"Forgot about the point," said Mack apologetically. Elspeth decided he was trying to be subtle. They had studied the entire harbor layout from the Pipit just the afternoon before, and Mack was not dumb about things like that. He was only dumb where it counted, she thought.

"There she is," said Corey, pointing, after another quarter hour of silent progress as they rounded the point.

Elspeth, who had noticed the island earlier only as a civilized anachronism in the general desolation of their Hatteras surroundings, studied the dark lump of land before them with new interest. It was remarkable for its single low hill amid the flatness, for its obviously landscaped and well-pruned tree silhouettes, for the large white-pillared mansion that capped its rise.

"Mack!" she cried, suddenly excited. "There are lights!"

"Yeah," said the photographer. "Somebody must be home."

"That's not what I mean," Elspeth protested. "Didn't Mr. Corey just tell us that when there are lights on Spindrift it means that things are going to happen?"

"They's just the regular lights in the big house windows," said the fisherman without excitement. "They's not the lights I was meaning."

"What's different about *them*?" Elspeth wanted to know.

"Tain't easy to say exactly," Corey replied slowly. He hesitated, seeking words beyond the limits of his meager vocabulary. "The lights I was meaning are higher up—and they move."

"Could be St. Elmo's fire," said Mack casually. He had opened his camera case and was squinting through its infra-red viewer. "Ought to be something for your story in this, Elly. It's the first new slant we've come up with for Orrin."

"Nothing like an unhaunted house to spice up a travelogue," said Elspeth with definite irony. She disliked having Mack speak of Orrin Lewis as "Orrin." Lewis still called *her* "Miss Marriner."

"Could be St. Elmo's fire," said Corey, picking up the conversation three sentences back as if nothing had intervened, "but it ain't. It shows up on clear nights as well as on rainy ones."

"These phenomena occur only at night?" Elspeth inquired.

"Whatever you call 'em, that's right," Corey told her. "Tain't easy to explain. There's a lot of things hard to explain about Spindrift. Take those house lights. They weren't shinin' last night. The whole place was as dark as my cellar."

"Maybe this—Horelle—was away somewhere and just got back," Mack offered. He stood up to take a shot of the Key.

"Sure—maybe," said Corey doubtfully. "But if he was, when did he go? And how did he get back here without being seen?"

"We'll ask him and tell you about it on the way back," said the poetess. In spite of herself she was feeling increased interest in Spindrift Key and its strange inhabitants. It might be a boon to an otherwise dull story after all.

"I'll be waiting," said Corey and there was something in his tone that caused Elspeth to glance sharply at the dark shape of him, standing up front, his hands on the wheel.

He replied, without turning around, "Just what it says. I'll be waiting for you—'less I get word you don't want me to." He sounded as if he was not looking forward to his vigil.

"We'll bring you word ourselves if this Mr. Horelle asks us to stay

any length of time," said Máck, putting his night camera back into its case. He sat down and this time lit two cigarettes, handed one of them to Elspeth. "Nice night to haunt a house," he said.

"Shut up!" she said snappishly. It occurred to her that they had switched roles. Now it was she who was genuinely interested in Spindrift Key, while Mack had become the scoffer. This annoyed her and she told herself she was acting the emotional fool.

"There's the dock," said Corey, pointing directly ahead.

They were sidling up to a well-groomed little pier whose base was lost in the shadow of a clump of poplars that rose like black lower fangs against the star-studded sky. Its white pilings gleamed their silent answer to the moonlight with the assurance of things well built and well tended.

"Funny," said Mack thoughtfully as Corey cut the motor to let momentum carry them in. "There are no boats."

"Never are," said the fisherman laconically. Elspeth and Mack looked at each other across the cockpit. There seemed nothing to say, nothing to ask. In a matter of minutes they would be close to the source of all knowledge about Spindrift—the Key itself.

Elspeth felt herself shiver although the night was warm. She tried to tell herself that it was merely fatigue. But inside she knew better. Corey's fearful legends of the island might be a contributing factor—but they seemed scarcely sufficient to cause the fear that gripped her. She could not have stated what she feared. She was simply scared witless.

Their bow thudded against the pier then—a prosaic sound, Corey scrambled up onto it and made fast the painter. Then he helped Elspeth ashore and she shook down her travel-rumpled tweed skirt while Mack, nursing his camera, climbed up beside them.

"Which way—Oh!" said Mack, spotting the neat white path that took up its hedge-lined existence at the shore end of the pier.

"That'll take you to the house," said Corey, who was engaged in stuffing his pipe. "Got nowhere else to go."

He chuckled at his own joke and Elspeth sighed. They dutifully thanked their Charon and slowly began to walk up the path. It led them toward a large clump of landscaped shrubbery whose nature was indistinguishable in the darkness, some fifty yards inland from the pier. There it took a ninety-degree turn to the left.

It was there, just around the curve, that the darkness came. It came

without sound, without motion, without warning. One moment Elspeth was looking ahead at the lighted windows of the big pillared house ahead—the next she was alone in a world without light, without stars without moon.

She cried out in alarm and it seemed to her that she was enveloped by an airlessness that must mean asphyxiation. Instinctively she stretched out an arm to where she remembered Mack, drew reassurance from the feel of his fuzzy jacket.

"Mack," she whispered, for somehow normal tones seemed wrong in the blackness. "Mack, what is it?"

"I dunno," he replied, his strong fingers finding hers and drawing her into the circle of his arm. "But, Christ, it would make one wonderful darkroom!"

It might have been more reassuring to Elspeth if his voice hadn't trembled when he said it.

## CHAPTER TWO

**I**T WAS, to Elspeth, like being enclosed in a globe filled with nothing. Even the firmness of the ground beneath her feet seemed not to be. Mack Fraser's arm and body were the only remaining tangibles—and for once in her life she was of no disposition to sneer at tangibles. She sorely missed them.

"What do you think it is, Mack?" she asked him, and her voice sounded small and very uneven and a long, long way back from her lips.

"I'm not thinking, Elspeth," said Mack, his own voice a little uneven. "I'm just standing here—waiting."

How long they had to stand here in the blackness Elspeth had no way of knowing. Without being able to see or to hear anything beyond the noises they themselves made, it was impossible to gauge anything. There was a bitter gathering coldness to the blackout that made her shiver and cling even more closely to her companion. She had no idea that muscular strength could be of any use in such an emergency, but she was suddenly and overwhelmingly glad that Mack was a strong man.

"Put your watch to your ear," she whispered. "You can tell from its ticks how long this is lasting."

"What good will that do?" Mack countered irritably. But she could feel the shift of his weight against her as he lifted his left hand. Then, after a long moment, he said, "That's funny. The damned thing seems to have stopped."

"Oh, fine!" said Elspeth. At least the failure of Mack's wristwatch was something on which she could take out the frustration that was making her want to scream out loud. She didn't want to take it out on Mack, however—not just then. He might get angry with her and step off by himself. She could not bear the thought of being alone in this black nothingness.

Then, again without warning, as suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone. Again they could see the white-shell surface of the path leading to the big white house with the white pillars atop the gentle rise of the hill that was Spindrift Key. The shells themselves again made crunching sounds under their feet. Above them shone the stars.

Spurred by an inner urge she did not at the moment understand, Elspeth studied them. They looked, to her untutored gaze, to be exactly



as they had been before they—went out. The Big Dipper still hung in the same spot, and the neatly spaced jewels in Orion's belt had not slipped a notch.

"They're just the same," she said with a sigh of relief. She became aware of the fact that she was still glued closely to Mack's right side, that his right arm was still curled tight around her waist. She said, "Well, really!" and disengaged herself with gentle firmness.

He looked down at her for a long speculative moment. Elspeth was a tall girl, a good five feet nine in her stockings, and tall men had never bothered her before—quite the reverse. But she had resented Mack's height ever since they had been teamed together for this assignment by Orrin Lewis in Manhattan more than three days before. She disliked acutely the idea of having to look up to him.

"Very well then," he said, and his voice was as unreadable as had been the bowl of darkness that had enveloped them moments before. "We might as well go on to the house."

He strode off rapidly, and Elspeth found herself forced to scurry without dignity or poise to keep abreast of him. She cursed him silently for a heel. Damn his dirty soul, she thought, he knew she would not dare let him get far ahead of her lest the darkness come back. She wished, not for the first time, that she was the sort of conniving wench who instinctively made certain that all available men were not only willing but anxious to serve her.

She had ample comeliness for the purpose when she chose to do something about it. Some female poets, she thought, were creatures of surpassing ugliness—perhaps that was why they had turned to poetry for expression. Aware of their inability to arouse male passion, they turned to verse as a sublimation.

She knew, of course, that there had been a few who were otherwise. Elinor Wylie was one—and perhaps Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for all that her father's twisted pathological tendencies and her own reactive hypochondria had hardly enlarged her capacity for attracting the male. And then there was Sappho—but what did anyone at this late date actually know about Sappho—or, for that matter, about the fabulously pornographic Elephantia, whose verses had been kept handy on Capri by the aging Tiberius as guides for the fantastic *spintriae* Suetonius had so vividly described in his *Lives of the Twelve Emperors* . . . ?

"Hey! Watch yourself, Elly." One of Mack's long arms invaded her

field of vision like a snake and grabbed her, realigning her progress on the path. She had been on the verge of blundering blindly into the perfectly clipped box-wood hedge on her right. Mack said, "How often do you get into these things, anyway?"

"Shut up," she told him. "I hate back-seat drivers."

"Some drivers seem to need them—to stay out of ditches—or even to stay on a path," he reminded her tactlessly. From then on she concentrated on keeping up with him.

The path widened in front of the house, whose square pillars rose at least twenty-five feet above them in simple serenity, colonnading a wide portico beyond which french windows gleamed in rectangular softness through the ruffled petticoats of their drapes. The lines and proportions of the house itself, enhanced by the dimness of the night, were even more impressive close at hand than when seen from a distance.

"Oh—it's perfectly magnificent!" breathed Elspeth, pausing to look up at its tall perfection.

One half of the large double front door was opened slowly by a girl who came toward them with the light behind her. As she approached, her features were cut in high relief by the flanking light from the french windows. They were as arresting, to Elspeth, as her figure, equally well revealed, was to Mack. Elspeth could hear the quick coarsening of his breath but forgot to be disgusted in her own absorption.

"Miss Marriner? Mr. Fraser? Welcome," the girl said. Her voice, utterly without alien or even local accent, was softly contralto. It sounded, somehow, as if it belonged to one who had the mastery of many tongues. The girl smiled and added, "We're very glad you got here. Won't you come inside?"

"Thanks—thanks very much," stammered Elspeth when for once Mack seemed too dumfounded to open his mouth. They entered a long high-ceiled hall, which appeared to extend right through to the rear of the house. Three quarters of the way back a circular staircase of white with dark mahogany railing curled upward airily in apparent graceful contempt for the law of gravity.

Soft Persian carpet covered much but not all of the low-gleaming fine parquet floor. Light sparkled with gentle prodigality from a crystal chandelier that hung from the low floral plaster relief of the ceiling fifteen feet above them. Dado and high-wall paneling bespoke

the genteel tastes of a century twice gone, and a pair of authentic-looking old portraits in simple gold frames provided the only other decoration. Chairs and table were mahogany—old and beautiful.

Seen in the light of the chandelier, the girl who had come to greet them was breathtakingly beautiful. Her hair, which hung in loose heavy demi-waves to her shoulders, seemed to match the deep red luster of the mahogany behind her. Her figure, although she was not tall, was perfectly proportioned—a fact which the sleeveless white silk shirt she wore, parted to the waistline, burgundy shorts and *espadrilles* that made up the remainder of her visible costume, did little to conceal.

Yet, curiously, such extreme modern informality in this instance failed to clash with the surroundings. This old house was meant to be lived in—lived in and enjoyed like some fine vintage brandy, by folk of charm, beauty, and dignity. And the girl had all three qualities. There was dignity in the so-young face framed by the mahogany hair—dignity and a sort of timeless poise that were startling in one whose youth was so apparent.

"I'll take you to Mr. Horelle," she informed them softly as she led them through a door to their right, which took them into a library whose white-oak wainscoting, unstained but polished with loving care for generations, had assumed the patina of a treasured meerschaum pipe. "He has been waiting for you. I believe he is very anxious to talk to you."

"About what?" Mack asked bluntly. Ever, thought Elspeth, the diplomat—the meatball. When bigger feet were made to come crashing through more fragile greenhouses, Mack would be wearing them. But the girl in burgundy shorts appeared unabashed. There were quick little dancing lights in her off-hazel eyes as she turned to look quickly at the photographer.

"Mr. Horelle will tell you that," she said demurely.

Briefly Elspeth wondered why it was that so very many women—some of them creatures of undoubted intelligence, beauty, and breeding—seemed to find lurking within themselves such quick response for men as crude as Mack. It was, she thought, a refutation of every basic tenet of civilization; it was brutalizing, it was the crudest sort of feminine masochism . . .

They went through another doorway with a flat-curved arch and Elspeth stopped thinking about it barely in time to avoid walking

into one of its fluted supporting pillars. They were now obviously in a sort of den or study at one end of the big house. It was an exquisite room—yet a thoroughly comfortable and practical one. Light hand-tooled leather with Florentine gilt work at its borders was inset in the vast satinwood desk. A huge globe rose behind it in a window embrasure to the left—and in a like embrasure to the right stood a celestial orb.

Directly above and behind the desk, which dominated the entire room, a large portrait hung against the wall. It was old—obviously, by the scarlet hues of its flesh tints and the ivory black of its shadows, a work of Gilbert Stuart. It depicted a surpassingly lovely young woman in white, a young woman clad in the neoclassic high-bosomed gown and ringlets of the early nineteenth century, a young woman who was both puzzlingly and hauntingly familiar to Elspeth.

"Don't you recognize her, Miss Marriner?" The gentle voice of the man who sat in the armchair behind the great desk brought her out of her reverie. She looked at him and saw that he was old and beautiful—beautiful as only the saints are beautiful—and very, very wise. The whiteness of his skin and hair, the blue underhue of his eyelids and the veins of his temples and the backs of his hands made Elspeth think of alabaster.

"Such pallor is a symptom—perhaps a failing—of great age," he told her, and she wondered fearfully whether he was telepathic or whether she had spoken her thought aloud. But the charm of his faint smile eased her embarrassment and canceled her fear. It was obvious that here was a very great gentleman.

"Our skin grows thin with time; our blood grows sluggish," he went on, and made a slight gesture of self-deprecation. "The effect of alabaster is not uncommon. But enough of myself. I believe Juana has explained by this time that I am extremely anxious to talk with you Miss Marriner and Mr. Fraser. Won't you sit down? And by all means smoke if you wish."

They sank into ancient leather armchairs that embraced them with the softness of clouds. Juana found herself a perch on a red-and-white leather hassock where she drew one slim tanned leg up beneath her. Damn it, Elspeth thought, the child *was* beautiful! That is, if she was a child. There was a timelessness behind her perfect poise that reminded Elspeth of Mr. Horelle himself.

"You are Mr. Horelle?" Mack asked then with his usual bluntness.

"May I ask how you knew our names?"

"It is not much of a mystery," said Mr. Horelle, again with his faint and wise smile. "I received information that you would almost certainly find your way here. If you had not"—he paused, gestured casually with one thin hand—"there would ultimately have been others. But perhaps not soon enough——"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Mack, openly puzzled.

"I shall try to explain," said Mr. Horelle gently. "But first I must ask that you hear me out with open minds. For you must be aware by this time that Spindrift Key is not exactly what it seems."

"So we just found out, over in the village," said Mack. He lit a cigarette and regarded Mr. Horelle as if daring him to say something startling.

"I judge that you have lived here for many years," Elspeth put in hastily, seeking to avert an open clash between the men. "This house—this island—they are like a well thumb in these surroundings. They show the taste of generations of security, the lavish care of someone who——" She bogged down helplessly in her own words, felt her face grow hot. Mack was regarding her as if she were an utter idiot but Mr. Horelle merely nodded his appreciation.

"If I were to tell you how many years I have lived here you would not believe me," he replied quietly. "Suffice it to say that it has been a very long time indeed. And there were others before me—have been ever since Spindrift Key became a tangential point."

"What's that?" Mack asked aggressively, suspiciously.

"I'm the one who's supposed to be writing this story," Elspeth reminded him sharply. "You're here to take pictures. Let me ask the questions."

"It's a very good question. Miss Marriner," said Mr. Horelle gently. "Let me state first that Spindrift Key is a tangential point. I don't suppose that either of you knows much about the tangency of time—or parallel time-tracks, if you will."

Elspeth glanced covertly at Mack, was inwardly delighted to note that he looked baffled. She turned eagerly to Mr. Horelle and said, "But I know a little about it. It's a theory that whenever an important decision in world history is made the world actually goes both ways with different subsequent histories. Oh, *damn!* That doesn't sound very clear, but I'm afraid it's the best I can do."

"Tommyrot!" said Mack loudly and rudely.

"On the contrary," said Mr. Horelle quickly, "it happens to be absolutely true. Hold on, young man—open mind!" He held up a reproving hand and protests visibly bubbled up toward Mack Fraser's lips. "I know exactly what you are going to say—that if a tangent in time develops out of historical decisions, then it must grow out of minor personal decisions as well. It takes forces far greater than any one person can generate to split the space-time continuum in which our universe exists.

"A nova, the destruction of a planet, even such momentous man-made events as affect the life history of this minor speck of space-dust we call Earth—these things all leave their marks in varying degrees. For a while after their occurrence—the time span varies according to the shock suffered by the fabric of the continuum—a tangential zone remains through which, to those who know the secret of the key, it is possible to effect a transfer between worlds."

"But what has ever happened here—in this godforsaken place?" Mack inquired, unable to contain himself longer.

"Spindrift Key is thrice tangential," said Mr. Horelle with an undertone of quiet assurance that made denial an impossibility. "Almost four centuries ago an Englishman named Sir Walter Ralcygh put ashore inside the Capes while en route back to England after founding a colony at Roanoke. He then decided that this island and the mainland behind it offered a safer and more generally favorable site for his colony. It was his plan to transfer it here before returning to England."

"And . . .?" said Elspeth, her fascination growing apace.

"In one of our tangential worlds he was able to make his transfer. His colony survived and the entire history of this continent was altered," said Mr. Horelle. "In the world you come from conditions arose which caused him to postpone doing so. The Roanoke colony, left to its fate, perished."

A butler with a face as wrinkled and sad as that of a kindly hound-dog made a silent entrance and set a silver tray that held bottles, ice, tumblers, and soda on an ancient cherrywood table against a side wall. For a brief spell the talk was light and general. Then Mr. Horelle resumed his lecture.

"In January of 1813 the American privateer *Patriot*, Captain Overstocks commanding, was lured onto a reef by the so-called 'bankers' or pirates, who then made a highly prosperous business out

of decoying ships to their ruin. The *Patriot* was running the then British blockade off the Capes with a safe-conduct arranged between the British admiral and Governor Joseph Alston of South Carolina. She was bound for New York."

"Alston!" exclaimed Elspeth, straightening. She looked again at the portrait behind the desk, recognized its subject as Theodosia Burr, only child of Aaron Burr and wife of Joseph Alston. "Of course" she said and her eyes grew bright as she nodded toward the picture. "that's some of the loot from the *Patriot*."

Mr. Horelle smiled ruefully and looked more than ever like an alabaster saint in the soft lighting. "I regret to say that it qualifies as pirate pillage," he informed them and sighed. "Many of the things in this house are likewise. My ancestors, some of them . . ." He made another deprecatory gesture.

"I'd like to take a color picture of it," Mack said alertly. He looked less combative, less disturbed, now that he was back on ground he could accept as real. But their host's next words put the furrow back in his brow.

"Actually Alston was only able to obtain his safe-conduct because he and his father-in-law were both trafficking with the British. There was a conspiracy afoot which planned for a double uprising in both the South and New England that could have altered the entire course of subsequent history. In your world the shipwreck prevented it. But in certain others . . ." His thin cultured voice faded out briefly.

Then, leaning forward over the desk, he told them, "And more recently, when a pair of brothers named Wilbur and Orville Wright were experimenting with heavier-than-air craft at nearby Kittyhawk, they made a number of their crucial plans and decisions in this very room. I believe you can compute the tangential potentialities of their discovery." He paused again.

"So," he concluded moments later, "Spindrift Key is perhaps the strongest tangential point on this continent. That it is a seasonal storm center is an added factor in its tangency. It is actually a multiple gateway to parallel worlds, its older tangencies maintained by the importance of more recent occurrences. I trust you understand me now"

"Sure," said Mack with his usual lack of tact. "I understand everything except—what in hell does it have to do with us?"

"Everything," said Mr. Horelle, mocking him politely. His half-smile returned. "You have been carefully selected, both of you, to

undertake an extremely delicate and difficult assignment in another world. As a matter of fact, in coming here, you selected yourselves."

"I'm getting out of here right now," said Mack, rising.

"I very much fear you will find it difficult," said Mr. Horelle, still smiling. "You see, when you stepped ashore, a transfer was effected. You may have noticed some—odd phenomena."

"The darkness!" exclaimed Elspeth. She felt a rushing return of her fears. All at once the old room, the old man, the beautiful Juana, ceased to be decorative, friendly, or interesting. She felt as if she had been dropped suddenly into a chamber of horrors.

"You mean we're not on the world we started out on?" asked Mack, staring at Mr. Horelle. "Phooey! I'm going back to Corey at the pier. Come on, Elly. Let's get the hell out of this nuthouse. Thanks for the drink and the bedtime story, Mr. Horelle. I suppose you have Corey on your pay roll to get suckers out here."

"Go ahead," said Mr. Horelle dryly, ignoring the photographer's insulting tone. "However, I'm afraid you'll find that some changes have been made since your arrival on Spindrift Key. Perhaps Miss Marriner will await your return here. I'd like to discuss your assignment more fully with her. Juana—will you see that Mr. Fraser doesn't get lost?"

Mack looked at Elspeth, who had not risen. She was definitely intrigued and wanted to learn more about Mr. Horelle and his strange island—whether or not he was a liar. A story was a story, true or not, and this was a gorgeous one that stirred her poetic imagination. Besides, she had no intention of passing another night on a corn-husk lodging-house mattress.

"I'll go alone, thanks," said Mack bitterly, but Juana, soft and far more appealing than a kitten, moved close to him and Elspeth could see his defenses visibly crumble.

"It may interest you to know," said Mr. Horelle with amusement "that Juana herself is from a world not your own."

Mack looked the girl up and down and grinned crookedly. "If they make them like you—honey, show me the way. Until then I'll settle for you in the here and now."

To Elspeth's annoyance the gentle Juana did not bridle at Mack's vulgarity. Instead she laughed softly and slipped a bare arm through his and, as they passed through the arch into the library, said, "Remember, Mr. Fraser, I'm *really* out of this world."



"Just call me Mack, honey," said the photographer. Elspeth, still sitting in her chair, felt anger beyond all reason. Somewhere deep within herself she wished she too were small and lissome and darkly lovely instead of too tall and too fair with straight hair so fine it refused stubbornly to take a wave.

"If you can spare an old man some of your attention," said Mr. Horelle, "I would like to inform you as to certain factors of your assignment. I think you will find them important."

"Sorry," said Elspeth, bringing herself back with a wrench.

"It is always startling at first," Mr. Horelle told her, "but there are a few of us—a *very* few, by the way—whose job is to watch these tangential points. We call ourselves—alas, without much originality—the Watchers. Thanks to the fact that natural cataclysms have much to do with the creations of such points, few of them are population centers; few are even habitable."

"But exactly what do you *do*—besides watch?" asked Elspeth.

"In effect," said Mr. Horelle, "we do our best to look after the health and fortunes of all the shapes and forms of Earth."

## CHAPTER THREE

THE BRIEFING, which was objective, detailed and complete, lasted until midnight, when Mr. Horelle, who sat shrunken and exhausted in his chair behind the desk, pressed a button that summoned the hound-faced butler. "I hope," he said, his voice almost inaudible, "that you will find your room comfortable. Also that you understand what you and your young man must do."

Her young man, Elspeth thought acidly. Mack had not yet put in his reappearance—nor had the fabulous Juana. But she said, "I hope so too. All I can promise is that we'll try."

"I can ask no more of anyone," whispered Mr. Horelle with the wisp of a smile. "I am sure that you have been wisely selected and will acquit yourselves admirably."

"I——" she began. Then, "It's a frighteningly important assignment," she said, and her panic returned with interest. Mr. Horelle merely nodded and his eyes were closed. Somehow Elspeth knew despite the questions banked within her, that the interview was at an end. She followed the butler dutifully to her room upstairs at the back of the house. Its grace and comfort were on a par with that of the lower-floor rooms. Once enfolded by the soft linen sheets, she found herself—to her amazement—drifting into slumber almost at once.

She was awakened at nine by a grave-faced maid who brought her breakfast and announced that she would be expected to start in an hour. In the bright sunlight her fears evaporated, as did her anger at Mack, and were replaced by a sense of high adventure. She did not even chide him about his bedraggled appearance when he came downstairs to join her and they walked to the wharf.

Another boat and boatman there awaited them—not Corey—and they were taken to the village, where a refurbished Pipit awaited them. Mack said, "You drive—I'm still sleepy. Try to keep out of ditches." He slung his cameras into the back, which already contained their other gear, suited action to words. He was snoring softly beside her when she tooled the Pipit down the lumpy main street. Other world or no, the village looked much the same—dismal bedraggled, sadly in need of a coat of paint.

It was a couple of hours later and the sun was close to the meridian when he stirred, yawned, sat up and stretched. By that time Elspeth had the Pipit close to the border of South Carolina. Mack regarded

her balefully through bloodshot eyes and said, "Can't you drive this thing without hitting every bump in the road? A man can't sleep with all this tap dancing."

"If you hadn't done whatever you did with Juana last night you wouldn't need sleep now," she said, corrosively virtuous.

"Some things are worth it," said Mack, and an infuriating sated-tomcat grin spread itself over his somewhat battered features. He yawned and stretched again without a trace of inhibition, then lit himself a cigarette.

"I still think we're both bats," he said. "Or maybe victims of one of old Horelle's perverted gags." He looked puzzled, fumbled in his breast pocket. He produced a worn pigskin billfold and pulled a sheaf of bills from it, eyed them dubiously. "I wonder if this damned stuff is any good," he murmured, squinting as he examined its alien engraving.

"It's good all right," said Elspeth. "I bought some fuel for the Pipit with it half an hour ago. Incidentally, it's a good thing this brutal beast of yours runs on kerosene—that's all they have here. The attendant thought you were dead."

"Okay," said Mack, looking at his watch. "Suppose I take over for a stretch. If you've managed to keep us on the road this long we're running on borrowed time. You can brief me on what we're supposed to do while I drive."

Elspeth pulled over and braked to a stop and they changed places. Behind the wheel Mack examined the road and whistled. She said, "Let's see you try to avoid bumps on this pavement."

Mack did not stoop to reply as he got the Pipit going again. He said, a moment or two later, "I hope your poetic brain hasn't scrambled this deal too badly. I don't mind telling you I had a shock when I went outside last night and found the old boy wasn't fooling."

"You took a remarkably long time getting over it," said Elspeth uncharitably. Despite her fine free new sense of high adventure, she was still gnawed at intervals with jealousy over the photographer's satyr-like behavior of the night before. After all, he had yet to make any sort of a play for *her*.

"Past history," said Mack, adroitly maneuvering the Pipit past a particularly tricky stretch of highway erosion. "I wish to hell we were allowed to fly this thing. We could make New Orleans in a couple of hours. I learned that much from Juana. But I suppose flying is out."

"You suppose correctly," said Elspeth crisply.

"I also suppose we're both good and fired from *Picture Week* back in whatever world we really come from," Mack added.

"Mr. Horelle says not," Elspeth told him. But despite her confidence in their ancient host she could not repress a tremor of inward worry. Life as a poetess before Orrin Lewis hired her as a staff writer for *Picture Week* had involved a number of substitutes for eating—substitutes whose only variety lay in their degree of non-satisfaction and discomfort.

"He acts like he thinks he's God," said Mack. "Dammit, what a putrid highway! Well, how about giving me the dope?"

"Very well," she told him. Despite her lurking desire to be as unpleasant as possible to Mack Fraser, she was much too aware of the importance of their strange assignment to risk wrecking its completion through personal pique.

She proceeded to organize her thoughts, seeking to put in some sort of reasonable order the succession of incredible things that had happened from the moment darkness had engulfed them upon Spindrift Key. All at once she felt small and alien and, save for Mack, very alone in a strange world. She reminded herself sternly of Mack's scandalous behavior with Juana lest she grow soft and foolish.

Viewed in retrospect, she felt that Mr. Horelle, intentionally or otherwise, had been vague as to some facets of the job he had assigned them. "You have everything you'll need," he had told her with quiet assurance that swept away all possible doubts. "When the time comes you'll know what to do right enough."

Apparently, from what she had been able to gather, they were entering the affairs of the alien world as catalysts to help solve a crisis that was threatening the entire continent of North America with war. They were supposed to proceed in the Pipit to New Orleans, where they were to make contact with the agents of an American rebel leader named Reed Weston. Weston, a former Cabinet member, was the leader of a group of recalcitrant citizens whose headquarters were somewhere in the rugged Ozark country.

"Weston seems to be the man the country needs," Mr. Horelle had told her. "But if you cannot reach him with the Pipit before the week is out it will be too late. Events will have moved past any possible peaceful solution. You see, my dear, in an effort to reunite a sorely

divided country the New Orleans government is plotting war with the Empire in Mexico.

"So Weston must get the whip hand, and quickly. You two can enable him to do so with the Pipit. But you must keep it on the ground until you reach him. Once its abilities are known, you will be lost. You see, in this world you are about to visit, there are no airplanes, no flying machines save balloons and uncontrollable rockets. Scientific and industrial development have been largely stifled in the name of autocracy."

It was hard going, adjusting herself so rapidly to a world utterly different from her own. But she had managed to absorb most of it—she hoped. If not, it was now too late for any return. She passed this along to Mack, who listened intently, his eyes on the road, his low forehead furrowed.

"We'll have to move carefully—watch our steps, Elly," he said when she was finished. "And for God's sake, try not to go winging off on any of those patented tangents of yours. Lord, that word again! I've been around a bit more than you have. Better let me make the contacts when we get there."

"You certainly did all right last night," said Elspeth—a remark Mack greeted with dignified silence.

She wondered again why he bothered her so. It wasn't love—it couldn't be. Not with a crude gadget-mad ex-pugilist who went dashing off after everything in skirts, shorts, or slacks that beamed a receptive eye in his direction. She resented the fact that she found herself thinking of him so much of the time, decided that the long-fabled peril of propinquity was, in this instance, a trifle too real. Something would have to be done about that. She felt grimy with the dirt of unplowed fields and tobacco plantations that lined the road in irregular alternation. Worst of all she felt herself unwanted.

Thanks to her lengthy session with Mr. Horelle the night before, Elspeth had not been especially startled by the discoveries of the morning—that of the strange boat and boatman who had brought them ashore from the Key, of the Pipit—repaired, refurnished and ready—of such apparent anachronisms as the filling station that gave nothing but kerosene.

There were other differences, of course, in the countryside through which they rode bumpily as the sun passed its zenith above them. Towns were fewer than in her own world, industrialization was less,

cities according to the map which Mr. Horelle had furnished them were almost non-existent. And the road itself, not only poorly paved and conditioned but a high-crowned two-lane affair, would scarcely have qualified as a third-class byway, much less a highway. But highway it was—on the map.

Save when they were in one of the widely separated towns or villages, they passed an average of four cars every twenty miles. And not once was the skyline broken by the pylons of a high-tension line; not once did a silver transport plane gleam and drone its way across the bowl of light blue sky overhead. The people they saw from time to time appeared shabby and loutish. And for every prosperous-looking mansion or farmhouse they passed several score decrepit-appearing hovels, which seemed for the most part to be inhabited by immense Negro families, whose members regarded the Pipit with an air of sullen disinterest.

They lunched late in an archaic public house in Spartanburg, noting with some surprise the Portrait of President Wilkinson upon the room's one unwindowed wall. He appeared a languid somewhat hollow-cheeked citizen of surpassing homeliness. The food was plentiful and incredibly cheap but the saddle of mutton, which was the main dish, was so high as to be almost inedible, a fact which seemed not to disturb their fellow-diners.

"No air travel, no refrigeration," Mack said sourly, pushing away his plate with distaste. "I'd like to take the Pipit up and scare the whey out of some of these cretins." Then he brightened up noticeably as their waitress, a comely chubby brunette of perhaps nineteen worldly summers and with a single apparent purpose in life, ogled him while she poured a bottle of wine out into remarkably fine crystal stemware.

"Relax, mate, and take ten," said Elspeth when the girl had departed with a provocative flirt of what lay beneath her apron strings. "We have a long way to go yet if we're to reach Atlanta tonight."

"Yes, teacher," said Mack. When he paid the bill at the bar he seemed pleasantly surprised that the money Mr. Horelle had given them proved acceptable to the cashier. "This," he told Elspeth in an aside, "is a very soft snap."

"To date," said Elspeth, ostentatiously crossing her fingers. Until then they had discovered no symptoms of conflict brewing—no uniforms, no marching troops, no air of tension.

It was dusk when they reached a strangely altered Atlanta, a small

city of no tall buildings and wide ill-tended parks. Elspeth was bone-tired and travel-worn and was glad to settle for an inside room at the rickety old American-plan hotel that seemed to be the best the town had to offer.

For a change, however, the table fare proved both good and bountiful and was served with deftness by polite colored waiters. Tension was here all about them, tension that was to increase at a geometric ratio with their arithmetic progress toward the nation's capital, New Orleans.

A fat-necked and ornately dressed man was seated in company with two Christmas-tree females of uncertain age at the next table during dinner. He regaled his companions throughout the entire meal with a vicious diatribe against "that stinking traitor, Reed Weston, and his whole rotten subversive crew of anarchists."

Weston, he claimed further, was not only undermining the foundations of proper government as duly elected by the representatives of the people, was not only threatening to destroy all Columbian civilization with his revolutionary ideas, but was in the pay of the Mexican Emperor himself—and this despite the fact that the country which had borne him and given him wealth was faced with war.

There was more, much more, but it was all in the same vein and did not improve with repetition. Mack wagged his head in mock exasperation, and one of the overdressed woman at the next table smiled faintly at him. But she did not look again. Perhaps, Elspeth thought, because the fat man was pouring champagne freely.

Champagne and bulging vests . . . There was, perhaps, the germ of a poem in it. She drifted off on the wings of her own thought, seeking phrase, form, rhythm, that would give it clarity, mood, and bite. Which, she wondered, was more sad—the drab whose insensate thirst for the gay life could be slaked only through letting herself be pawed by such a gross and loathsome creature—or the fat man, ignorant of love save that which his money could buy.

"Come out of it, Elly," said Mack, shattering the pleasant lilac sadness of her mood. "We'd better turn in if we're going to get an early start tomorrow."

"Look who's talking," said Elspeth. But she went along to her room meekly enough. She was far too worn out physically, nervously and emotionally—to let Mack irritate her further. She all but

fell asleep in the weird dark-wood-and-copper horror that passed in his Atlanta for a bathtub.

She was awakened at six the next morning by a whistling voice from the desk downstairs that emerged from a speaking tube close to the head of her bed. This was, apparently, a world without telephones, although she had noticed what looked like a telegraph desk in the lobby the night before on her way to bed.

She was considerably pleased on getting downstairs to discover that Mack was not in the dining room, where an alert young Negro was serving breakfast to early risers. But he informed her courteously that Mr. Fraser had already eaten and was waiting for her in the garage across the street.

She limited herself to toast and coffee, paid the check and joined the photographer. He was deep in study of a large six-wheeled touring vehicle parked next to the Pipit. He acknowledged Elspeth's arrival with a nod and said, "Get a load of this buggy. Looks like a dinosaur."

"It's big, that's all," she said not comprehending his interest in what to her was merely a clumsy machine.

For this comment she received a lengthy technical lecture. It was as different from the Pipit as day from night. Mack lifted a hood that swung oddly on a pivot, showed her an engine that looked to Elspeth like any other engine. "The damned thing runs on ammonia," he told her. "Didn't you notice *any* of the cars we passed on the road yesterday?"

"Unh-unh." She shook her head. "But look--the Pipit has new plates." She regarded them with surprise.

"We wouldn't have got that far yesterday without them," Mack told her contemptuously. "Get in. We're going to make a try for Baton Rouge. We can lunch in Selma."

Feeling like a hopeless ignoramus, Elspeth obeyed. Not until they were well out of Atlanta did she straighten from her slump and utter the word, "Teeth."

"What's that?" said Mack, dodging a hole in the road.

"Teeth, teeth, teeth" she replied. "Didn't you notice?"

"Notice what?" He seemed honestly puzzled, risked a quick glance at her as if to reassure himself of her sanity.

"Look." She pulled from her handbag a small container like a pepper shaker with little holes under its hinged lid. "I found this in



my alleged bathroom at the hotel. Apparently everyone uses the stuff here—it's got a government seal."

"So it's a monopoly," Mack remarked with a shrug.

"Maybe, but have you noticed everybody's teeth in this world? They're perfect. And we didn't see a dentist's sign in either Spartanburg or Atlanta. They may not have airplanes and telephones, but they've found something to keep teeth from decaying."

"I take it all back—you *have* got eyes," said Mack graciously. Elspeth restrained an impulse to box his visible ear.

"This could be pretty valuable back in our world," she said. "Apparently they just pour this into water and rinse out their mouths with it. That's what the directions say to do."

Toward noon, as they approached Selma, they discovered that railroad tracks ran parallel with the road. They were the first Mack and Elspeth had seen in this strange new world. After a while in the Pipit's rear-view mirror, Elspeth, who was driving, spotted the smoke from an approaching train. When it passed them at high speed it proved to be a gaudy affair with a rear locomotive which by its trail of smoke appeared to be jet- or rocket-propelled. It was painted bright red and the six cars in front of it formed a complete spectrum from orange to purple.

"She goes right along, doesn't she?" said Elspeth brightly, for which amiability she received only a look of contempt.

Elspeth wondered why Mack despised her so. Perhaps, she thought, he despised all poets. He was a crass materialist in many ways. Yet he could be as fussy about framing a photograph to perfection as any poet over selecting exactly the right word to give meaning to a couplet. He was, she decided, an iambic-pentameter type. She glimpsed the sweeping lawn of a great estate and forgot about him in the comforting sight of the emerald sward.

They lunched as planned in Selma beneath another picture of the languid President Wilkinson. Inevitably their fare consisted of southern fried chicken, mashed potatoes and biscuits. When she had eaten all she could Elspeth looked at Mack and sighed.

"Apparently a change in worlds does not mean a change in regional cooking," she said. "I'll wager this same fare is being served in five hundred thousand different southern restaurants in five hundred thousand different versions of Earth. It frightens me."

"It's probably a lot more frightening to the chickens," said Mack.

He had been thoughtful and silent all morning. Now he added, "I'm liking this assignment of ours less and less as we go along."

"Afraid?" Elspeth inquired lightly. He shook his head.

"Just cautious. It's tricky enough to play a three-cornered mess like this one we've been tossed into when you know all the local angles. We're walking into it mighty cold—and green. We could make a fatal misstep and never know it."

"Look at the map," said Elspeth, nodding toward the opposite wall. It revealed a North America whose divisions were utterly different from those of their own world.

The United States, renamed the Columbian Republic, extended from Maine to Key West as before. Evidently, however, the Oregon controversy of a century earlier had gone against Columbia, for the Columbia River marked the Canadian border in the Northwest. And while Texas lay intact to the Rio Grande, most of Arizona, New Mexico, part of Nevada, and the southern half of California belonged to a Mexican Empire that extended all the way to the Isthmus of Panama.

"Wonder how that Mexican thing got started," mused Mack. "And how we became the Columbian Republic."

"Parallel time-tracks," said Elspeth smugly. "Things went differently 'way back when. Do you believe it now?"

"I'll have to until I wake up," he growled. She decided that the problem of adjusting to a tangential universe was proving hard on the rigidly logical Mack. For herself, she had long since given up trying to find logic. It was better, in this instance, to take things as they came.

They drove on and on through the Deep South that afternoon and early evening. They passed through Meridian, Mississippi, not long after leaving Selma, then headed southwest toward Baton Rouge over a road whose lack of excellence varied from township to township according to local whim and budget.

Once they were almost forced off the highway into a swamp as a long military convoy passed them at high speed en route for the Mexican border. The big multiwheeled vehicles were propelled by some jet drive similar to that of the locomotive, with exhaust vents flaring fiercely along their sides. In the trucks were green-clad soldiers armed with odd-looking weapons.

"They may not have planes," Mack remarked thoughtfully, "but

somebody's been seeing they know how to kill on the ground. Some of those things they're carrying look rugged."

"No matter what world man lives on he always sees to it that he has the tools to kill his fellows," said Elspeth bitterly.

"If he doesn't his civilization perishes," said Mack quietly. "It's a story as old as Rome—a lot older."

They drove on through an afterglow until, within a few miles of Baton Rouge, they were stopped by a red light that was swung across the road in front of them. Mack, who was driving, pulled to a stop, and a suntanned young officer in a pale blue uniform with silver trim and insignia walked over to the Pipit. A pair of bucket-helmeted soldiers moved up behind him.

"I'd like to see your papers," he told them. "We're checking for rebels. A lot of them are trying to cross the river to Weston's camp."

Mercifully the passes and identification with which Mr. Horelle had furnished them were in order. Mack mopped sweat from his brow as the officer motioned them to proceed. "That's a neat looking car you have, Mr. Fraser," he said. "Is it foreign?"

"English," said Mack. "They make the best."

"Wish we had their know-how," said the officer sadly.

As they drove on Mack was even more thoughtful. Finally he said. "Did you notice the guns those soldiers were carrying? They looked to me like some sort of machine rockets. And our friend's pistol. Unless I'm crazy, that was a rocket job too. Funny that they haven't learned to fly. . . ."

## CHAPTER FOUR

BATON ROUGE proved a delightful surprise. In place of the sleepy little river city of their own world, Mack and Elspeth found themselves driving into a metropolis far larger and far more impressive than the down-at-heel Atlanta in which they had slept the night before. The buildings they passed did not tower to skyscraper heights, but they were many, large and, almost without exception, magnificent.

"Why," exclaimed Elspeth, "it's like a never-ending garden party hung with Japanese lanterns!" Her fatigue faded before excitement as the Pipit moved slowly amid bizarre traffic composed of multi-wheeled vehicles. They were rolling along a broad sleekly paved eight-lane double boulevard with a mimosa-planted central park area. The blue blossoms shone white in the light of looping strings of lights hung from poles lost against the trees in a garland effect that continued for miles.

On either side the double boulevard was flanked by side-walls forty feet wide reminding Elspeth of the Champs Elysées in Paris, and beyond them lay an apparently endless succession of great houses, palaces, and walled gardens. Baton Rouge was very evidently one of the major cities of the Columbian Republic. Elspeth felt a quick stir of inner response to its drama and beauty.

"It's a mighty well-guarded garden party," said Mack, his more prosaic vision caught by the large proportion of vari-colored uniforms that flashed brilliantly amid the more somber male civilian costumes and the gay gowns of strolling women.

"But it looks so gay--so Continental!" said Elspeth, her whole self aglow. "It doesn't look American at all."

"It isn't--it's Columbian," said Mack. "Let's get to a decent hotel quick--and nail ourselves a room. *If* we can find rooms. This town looks loaded."

As usual Mack was right. The first three hotels they tried were full to the gunwales and the fourth was evidently the supreme caravansary of Baton Rouge--Bienville House. Elspeth felt like the wreck of the Birkenhead, as she stood forlornly amid the splendors of the lobby while Mack consulted the room clerk.

*Semitropical extravagance!* she told herself after a cursory study of the opulent velours drapes that framed the Roman-arched-two-story

windows. She did her best not to notice the superb features, figures and grooming of the women who paraded past in a constant stream, most of them hugging the elbows of slim-waisted young officers whose gaily colored dress uniforms were reminiscent of Napoleonic splendor. Even the evening dress of the non-uniformed males was colorful, with multihued commerbunds, waistcoats, and lapels.

She wished Mack would get it over with so that they could continue their search for shelter in more modest surroundings. But to her amazement she heard the desk clerk, a black-browed individual with a professional smile, say, "We're most happy to be able to accommodate you, sir. It is only by the sheerest happy chance——"

"That's great." Mack cut off his effusiveness curtly. It seemed to Elspeth, when they crossed the lobby to the bank of elevators a few moments later, following a scarlet-clad golden-haired bellboy, that Mack was eying her furtively, even suspiciously.

But before she had the opportunity to do more than register this impression, her entire interest was caught up by an immensely tall white-haired officer, completely magnificent in blue, scarlet and gold, who entered the lift after them. Elspeth tightened her fingers on Mack's near arm and tried not to register her astonishment.

For the general or field marshal or whatever he was was almost coal-black of skin. For once even Mack was visibly startled—perhaps as much by the deference the white elevator operator and bellboy showed him as by the fact that a man of such obviously high rank should be a Negro. The black giant smiled pleasantly at Elspeth, then at Mack, as the lift rose slowly.

"You must have had a long trip today," he said politely in a deep and beautifully rich bass voice.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Elspeth woefully. "Do we look *that* terrible?" Mack, for once, was too stunned to speak. The great man of ebony looked at Elspeth gravely.

"If you did I assure you I should not have remarked upon it," he said with a softness that robbed his reproof of its sting. Before Elspeth could manage to assemble and deliver a reply the lift stopped and the magnificent Negro stepped out into the hall. There he turned, smiled again, and said, "I hope you both enjoy your stay with us."

Their stop was one floor higher up—the fourth—and, as they discovered later, the top story of the hotel. As the golden-haired bellboy, having put down their two suitcases on the corridor carpet, unlocked a

high handsome white-paneled door, Mack asked him, "Who was that—the big chap with all the gold lace—back in the lift?"

"You mean you didn't know that was Marshal Henry?" The boy seemed utterly astonished. "He's here in the city to consult with President Wilkinson—about this Mexican War business. He's Chief of Staff of the Columbian Army."

"I don't care what he is," said Elspeth. "I thought he was a very charming gentleman."

"He's a very good tipper," said the boy pointedly as he opened the door. Elspeth entered first, took in at a glance the high-ceiled expanse of the room. Then, with a little sigh of sheer relief at the prospect of luxury, she swiftly crossed the soft carpet to fling open one of three french windows that opened on an attractively elaborate wrought-iron balcony. The leaves of a palm tree unfolded before her and beyond and below them she could catch glimpses of the flashing loops of light along the great boulevard.

*Magic lantern city*, she thought, then wondered whether *Goblin city* might not be more appropriate. She sought some phrase that would trap in the chill finity of letters the warmth and magic around them, the low-throated gaiety, the softness of the night air, the fragrance of millions of blossoms.

It eluded her and she put aside the effort, knowing that in time it would come to her. Dreamily she turned and drifted back into the room, feeling as if she were at least six inches off the floor and floating, floating . .

She was jarred back to earth with a thud—by the sight of Mack, his jacket off his tie pulled loose, his shirt unbuttoned halfway to the waist, stretched out casually in one of the huge room's several easy chairs. Arrogantly he blew cigarette smoke at the ceiling, eying her with a half-hidden defiance.

"Don't detonate," he told her, holding up a warning hand. "Listen. This is the only decent room left in the city. Of course I had to tell the clerk downstairs we were—er—together to get it. It seems that the marriage rules are a bit lax in this world. The clerk took one look at us and told me that it didn't matter—before I could lie about it and say we were man and wife."

Elspeth's eyes ranged quickly from his suitcase, already open on a rack next to hers just inside the door, to the luxurious bathroom visible through a half-open door to her right, to the immense platform bed

whose four twisting walnut posts pointed with slim dignity toward the ornate floral pattern that adorned the plaster of the ceiling high above them. Mack's eyes followed hers.

"Roses," he said, looking up at them. "Sort of cute, aren't they?"

Elspeth blew her top. "Mack Fraser," she began with a full head of steam, "if you think for one moment that I'm going to go to——"

"Relax, my iron virgin," he told her with insulting blandness. "You can sleep on the couch if you elect to spurn the charms of my company. In view of the possibility of your snoring, it might be better that way all around."

"Oooh!" sputtered Elspeth, for once in her life utterly unable to find verbal expression. Mack contented himself with lying back in the big chair and turning on his most evil leer. He was too evidently enjoying her discomfiture.

All at once overcome with fatigue, to which were added the emotional and nervous and intellectual strains of the past five days, Elspeth collapsed on the carpet and burst into tears. She was dimly conscious of Mack, swearing but concerned, rising quickly to his feet and hurrying over to comfort her. As her sobs subsided Elspeth knew that the explosion had eased the tension within her. She also knew that her head felt stuffy and that her nose was red.

"Cut it out, Elly," Mack said helplessly, bending over to put his hands under her arms. "Please don't cry." He pulled her easily to her feet, hugged her to him briefly, then released her with an awkward pat on the shoulder. "I was only fooling, Elly—honest I was—except about the fact that this *is* the only decent room in the city."

"D-decent isn't exactly the word, is it?" she replied, sniffing. "Mack what are we going to *do*?" She felt a sudden intense desire to be dead. Now Mack would really have something on her. He fumbled in his hip pocket, emerged with a rumpled handkerchief, thrust it under her nose.

"Blow!" he told her firmly. Then, when she had complied, "Cheer up, it's not as bad as all that. Get into a robe and take a bath and you'll feel better. I'll take a trip downstairs and see if I can't pick up some books or something that will give us some idea of what we're up against in this screwball world. When you get through with your bath I'll take one. Then let's settle down to do some boning. And for God's sake don't worry about *me*. I'll sleep on the couch. I was going to anyway."

"Oh, Mack, you're so good and I'm so simply stinking," she heard herself say with considerable surprise. She stifled another impulse to

sniffle and even achieved a watery smile. "All right, Mack," she said meekly. "I'll take a bath."

"That's more like it, Elly," he told her, reclaiming his handkerchief and stuffing it into his pocket as he moved toward the door. When he reached it he turned and added over his shoulder. "You won't be stinking after you bathe."

"You star-faced mole!" she snapped at him. He was grinning like a hateful ape as he closed the door behind him.

After a brief moment of defiant hesitation, Elspeth took his advice and got hurriedly out of her grimy dress and underthings. Once in the tub, an immense gleaming sunken affair, she felt the warm water wash away her travel dirt and most of the tensions within her, leaving her in a comfortable glow of fatigue. When she emerged Mack was already back from his foray downstairs. He waved a hand toward a wheeled cellarette adorned with bottles, ice and glasses.

"Help yourself," he told her. "It's on Mr. Horelle. And while I'm washing the rings out of the tub you might look these over. We've got to do a lot of homework in a hurry." He nodded in the direction of a fair-sized stack of books and periodicals which lay piled on a straight chair near the door.

By the time Mack had bathed and rejoined her—looking unexpectedly scrubbed and little-boyish in a worn green-and-white flannel robe—Elspeth was already deep in concentration upon a brief popular history of Columbia that Mack had managed to purchase in the lobby. Her drink, barely sipped, stood forgotten at her elbow. Mack had to give her a couple of shakes before she became aware of him.

"Hey!" he cried. "Learned anything yet?"

"Oh!" She looked at him blankly for a moment before awareness returned to her. "Only that we have a ghastly amount to learn," she said. She made a vague gesture toward the other reading material he had assembled. "You might see what you can get out of those. I'll give you a précis of this as soon as I'm finished. It's the same world as ours up to eighteen fourteen."

"Then old Horelle wasn't kidding us," said Mack. He picked up the other books and magazines and settled himself in a chair. He seemed, Elspeth thought, to have become at least temporarily adjusted to the fact of their being on an alien Earth. It had taken concrete evidence to do the trick. Mack was not one to let a mere theory convince him.

Elspeth again lost herself in the history book. The differences in



the past—and therefore in the present—were fascinating. The jump-off point appeared to be a Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy, which had been renewed in 1814 with belated but overwhelming success. In return for pulling the fledgling United States out of the war with England, the conspirators had, abetted by Spaniards and Creoles and New Englanders, managed to overthrow the Madison regime following Admiral Cockburn's burning of Washington, D.C., had quickly made peace with England and founded the Columbian Republic.

In Europe the battle of Waterloo had come and gone while Burr and Wilkinson—entitled Founding Fathers in this book—organized their new nation along the hierarchal lines of the ancient Republic of Venice. In Columbia the franchise was limited to the property-owning few, slavery was permitted, and public office was unofficially but actually a matter of inheritance and appointment rather than popular election. Wilkinson, Alstons, and the like were names repeated in prominent posts, generation after generation.

New Orleans was selected for the new capital—since the Columbian Republic's attention was focused upon the South and Latin America rather than on Europe. One of the conditions under which Great Britain had favored the great conspiracy was that its leaders, once in power, use every influence in their power to assist the breakup of the Spanish Empire in South and Central America and the Caribbean. However, it seemed doubtful to Elspeth that the method of accomplishment was one the British had expected or liked.

By 1820 both Mexico and all of South America, with the exception of Brazil, had been ripe for revolt—largely incited by Columbian money, arms, and pledged support. Swift frigates of the Columbian Navy, under the command of Commodore Stephen Decatur, had raided St. Helena, flying the rebel Mexican flag, had successfully salvaged Napoleon and sailed with him to New Orleans.

When the British government became aware of this coup the ex-Emperor of the French was already ensconced on a throne in the Viceroy's palace in Chapultepec, and all of the Americas below the Rio Grande were up in arms. Thanks to Austrian and Russian aid in Europe, the more-or-less United Americas had been able to beat off the combined British, French, and Spanish efforts to regain the lost territory.

The British had captured Boston and burned it, and the Columbians had retaliated by seizing both Montreal and Quebec—cities which

were returned to their original owners when peace finally was signed in 1826. The Mexican Empire was firmly established as far south as the Isthmus of Panama. South America was divided up into one kingdom, Brazil, and the republics of Venezuela, Peru, and Patagonia. These divisions still remained, largely unaltered.

Columbia and Mexico, the latter under the rule of the erstwhile Duke of Reichstadt, had gone to war briefly in 1841 over the disputed territory of Texas, with the Columbians winning handily, thanks largely to the genius of Generals Pillow and Quitman. In 1850 the Russians, discovering gold close to their California settlement, had attempted to enlarge their holdings there by conquest. Mexico and Columbia, along with the British in Canada, had quickly joined forces to drive the minions of the Czar from the Western Hemisphere and had divvied up the territory among themselves.

Then had come peace until 1869, when the northeastern states, resentful of their waning importance in the Republic, made an effort to secede. The contest lasted five years and all but finished Columbia. But the South, the Midwest—tied to the South by the Mississippi waterway and the nearness of New Orleans—and the Far West had ultimately been able to prevail against the ten rebellious states—including New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—following the decisive battle of Elmira.

Thoroughly crushed, the Northeast still played a secondary role in the nation's affairs, was famed for its summer resorts and its down-at-heel lost-causism rather than for its heavy industry. Columbia and Mexico had sent a combined expeditionary force to Europe in order to abet France in the first war of the West against the union of Turko-Austro-Prussian forces, which threatened to overrun the continent at the beginning of the present century. Abetted by Russia, the Allies had finally been victorious in 1906.

The second great East-West war had been against Russia, whose Czar had sought to destroy the Ottoman Empire and gain a Mediterranean Sea outlet. But the rest of Europe had united against him and driven the Russians back behind the Vistula. Since then the world had been living in uneasy peace.

Internal troubles in Columbia were serious, Elspeth discovered, despite the legitimist tone of the book she was reading. This although the slavery problem had finally settled itself. Compelled by world opinion to enforce humanistic legislation upon slaveowners, the Re-

public had discovered slavery to be economically impossible.

More and more slaves were manumitted to save their owners from bankruptcy as their support grew more expensive than the paying of salaries to unindentured workers. When at last the institution was abolished in 1901, passage of the bill that freed the few remaining slaves had been a mere formality.

There was virtually no color line save among the few oligarchical families that actually held tightly the reins of power. Freed slaves for more than a century had been winning high places in government, business, the arts and society; had proved to be invaluable citizens and producers.

But Columbia, thanks to its history and form of government, was too limited a Republic to endure without constant internal turmoil. And turmoil it now had in the form of Reed Weston, a one-time highly successful industrial inventor who had turned to bite the hand that fed him—or so the book implied.

Seeking to read between the lines, Elspeth thought she detected a profit motive in the revolt. Evidently invention and scientific progress—at least in so far as their practical applications went—were strictly limited by the oligarchy. This, she decided, would account for the poorly paved highways, the few cars, the absence of heavier-than-air craft—as well as the amazing weapons of the soldiers they had seen. The rulers of Columbia were not permitting the enrichment of their masses through large-scale cheap production of consumer goods—if it were possible in this culture. On the other hand, they were seeing to it that the military, their defenders, were equipped with the very best in weapons and transportation.

Apparently this state of affairs was more than Reed Weston could endure. He had, while high in the government, attempted to push through legislation that would widen the scope of unlimited private enterprise. He had acquired a considerable following, not only in the still-underdeveloped Northeast but in the very heart of the Republic itself.

When irrevocable Presidential veto finally blocked his efforts, Reed Weston had, the book said, basely resisted arrest and fled, first to the Black Hills of South Dakota, then to Missouri, where his legions of supporters had slowly and secretly gathered around him and had formed some sort of organization.

With a strong irregular army, he had moved south to the Ozarks.

becoming thus an open threat to New Orleans itself. He insisted that President Wilkinson either withdraw his veto or resign and permit the unthinkable—an election open to every man in Columbia, whether he owned property or not. This, the book insisted, was nothing less than anarchy.

There was no mention made of the impending trouble with Mexico, but Mack, in his reading, had found plenty of material on that subject. After listening to Elspeth's summary he told her what he had learned about it.

"It's another grab like Texas," he said. "Southern California is the target this time. A lot of Columbians have settled there, and Wilkinson and his gang are screaming persecution. My hunch is that Wilkinson and this black marshal of his are planning to kill two birds with one stone. They'll heat up the country for a war with Mexico and come up with southern California for a reward. And if this Weston doesn't give himself up they'll be able to pin a traitor tag on him and make it stick. Frankly, I wouldn't like to be in his shoes."

"That's our job, isn't it?" said Elspeth. "To get him a new pair of shoes?"

"Yeah," said Mack, stretching and yawning. "But I don't see why we have to go all the way to New Orleans. It seems to me we ought to be able to contact him a lot quicker from here."

"This is the summer capital," Elspeth told him "the play city for Wilkinson and his friends. I'll lay odds it's too tightly guarded and screened. It certainly is beautiful."

"Yeah," said Mack with another yawn. "Let's turn in."

Although it was late when they got to sleep, Elspeth was awakened early the following morning. Beneath her window the dawn stillness was shattered by men shouting and the sounds of running feet. She got up and went out on the balcony and looked down, tying the belt of her blue silk robe as she did so and pushing the hair back out of her eyes. Below, through the green palm fronds, she saw a pair of soldiers in lavender uniforms chasing a civilian, who was fleeing desperately along the broad sidewalk.

"Stop, you bastard!" shouted one of the soldiers, raising an oddly designed weapon to his shoulder. When the fugitive failed to halt, the soldier pressed a trigger. There was a back flash over his shoulder, a ripple of heat in front of the flaring muzzle.

Where the running man had been there was nothing—nothing but.

for a single flickering instant, an impression of still-running disembodied shoes. Then they, too, were gone.

The other soldier, apparently a noncommissioned officer, looked angrily at the firer, then carefully examined the spot on the sidewalk where the running man had vanished. He scuffed at a faint brown stain on the cement, then said, his voice tight with fury, "What's the idea of burning him here? You know how the lieutenant is about marking up these sidewalks. He'll have us——What in hell are you looking at?"

He turned quickly, followed the soldier's pointing finger—which was upthrust directly toward Elspeth on the balcony.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**I**NVOLUNTARILY Elspeth drew back behind the shelter of the palm. But there could be no doubt about the purpose of the soldiers beneath. Suddenly terrified, she sought to peer down at them through the spear-shaped fronds of the tree, saw the one with the strange weapon raising its flared muzzle toward the balcony.

At that moment, mercifully, an officer appeared and moved swiftly to strike down the disintegrator—if that was its title—before it could be used again. He slapped the soldier sharply and cursed him in low but violent tones. The man achieved a ragged salute, pointed a finger up at the balcony.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but that woman up there—she saw us use the dis——"

"You goddamned idiot!" the officer exclaimed. "This is going to raise all kinds of a stink. I gave you men strict orders not to use your . . ."

She lost the rest of it as the fronds rustled in a sudden breeze. Nonetheless, without understanding the issues involved, she felt a distinct impression of having witnessed something unpardonable; further, that steps were going to be taken directly to ensure her silence. Terrified, she ducked back into the big room, where a sleepy-looking Mack was sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

"What in hell's going on?" he asked her, yawning. "What was all that shouting outside?"

She told him as rapidly as she could. She had barely concluded when the speaking tube at the head of the huge four-poster whistled a summons. Mack regarded her for a moment with raised eyebrows, then got up off the couch to answer it.

He gave terse uncommunicative responses to his unseen collocutor, then let the mouthpiece slip back into its hole and ran his fingers through his hair. "That was the desk," he told her, frowning. "You seem to have got us into one sweet mess. A Captain Logan is waiting for you downstairs. He said something about its being a routine formality, but I don't like the sound of it. I don't like any of this setup."

"But, Mack, I haven't done anything!" Elspeth protested. A rising anger was beginning to submerge her fear.

Mack lit a cigarette and tossed the pack to her as she sank onto the

edge of the bed. He shook his head and said thoughtfully, "They're giving us just fifteen minutes to get dressed and downstairs. I'm for getting out of here in five. So get hopping. If we do report they will probably tie us up for days—or longer."

"But if they're waiting for us in the lobby," said Elspeth anxiously, "how are we going to avoid them?"

"I'm trying to figure out a way right now," Mack told her quickly. "For God's sake get into your things. And don't go prudish on me now. We haven't time for it."

"Don't be a furry weasel," snapped Elspeth, gathering the shreds of her ego about her as she darted for the bathroom. By the time she emerged, four minutes later, Mack was already dressed after a fashion and in the act of closing her suitcase.

"But we haven't a chance," she told him. "Mack, you haven't seen this—this thing of theirs in action."

"We took on a job, didn't we?" countered Mack, poking a protruding corner of nightgown out of sight under the edge of her bag without regard for wrinkles. "Hell, we took Horelle's money, didn't we? We promised to make our contact in New Orleans today, didn't we? Come on—get moving."

He handed her one of the bags and then drew from his jacket pocket a flat deadly looking automatic pistol whose presence amid his gear Elspeth had not hitherto suspected. He caught her look of surprise, muttered, "It's a good thing I brought it along," and opened the hall door cautiously.

Evidently it was against Bienville House regulations to have soldiery openly patrolling the upstairs corridors, for their exit was unguarded. But as they reached the elevator bank Mack uttered an "Oh-oh!" and yanked her swiftly past and into the shelter of the stair well just beyond.

They were barely out of sight when the lift light went yellow, showing an upcoming car, and a heavy metal grille clicked open. A pair of erect young men in well-cut civilian clothes moved away from them toward the room they had just left, walking in perfect purposeful step and in well-briefed silence.

"Do you suppose they're after us?" said Elspeth anxiously.

Mack nodded grimly. "No supposing about it," he said and then his eyes lighted up with inspiration. "Come on, Elly. I think I have an out." He moved swiftly and silently as an Indian down the wide

marble stairs. Elspeth, following less silently, wished her bag were not quite so heavy.

"Stick right in back of me and keep your big mouth shut," he commanded when they reached the floor below. He peered out at the corridor and whispered, "I got a glimpse of this layout last night when we came in. If I'm right—and I'll lay odds that I am—we may get out of this yet."

He moved rapidly toward a door directly across from the elevators and knocked on it swiftly. Elspeth found herself admiring his ability to make instant plans and decisions, as well as to act on them in an emergency. At the same time she disliked herself for her admiration. After all, Mack was really nothing more than a well-trained male animal who could manipulate competently the trickeries of camera focusing. But could he write a sonnet or compose an original philosophic concept that would hold water? Could he paint a picture worth looking at or sculpt a passable statue? Could he compose a . . .

"For God's sake, snap out of it, Elly!" Mack's whisper was like a whip. "Of all times to go dreaming off into a——" It was his turn to snap out of it as, at that moment, one of the big double doors at which he had knocked was opened a few inches. Without hesitation Mack pushed himself aggressively inside, holding his pistol in front of him. With a jerk of the head, he motioned Elspeth to follow him and close the door after her. She did so numbly, mechanically parked her bag carefully alongside his just inside the doorway.

Only then did she look up—and gasp. To her utter surprise and consternation, the towering figure of Marshal Henry was facing them, clad only in pongee underwear. His impressively handsome black face gathered into a thunderous scowl as he slowly lifted his hands above his white head.

"Sorry to use these tactics, Marshal," said Mack with what was for him unusual politeness. "My young lady here had the bad luck to see some of your trained seals use a disintegrator or something on a fugitive in front of the hotel just now. They want to detain us and we haven't the time."

There was a long and, for Elspeth, a difficult pause as the enormity of Mack's plan became apparent to her. The huge Columbian chief of staff scowled intently at a side wall, seemed to have considerable difficulty in refocusing his attention on the photographer and the pistol he was holding.



"A disintegrator, you say—in front of the hotel?" He looked hard at Elspeth, then added, "Tell me what you saw."

She did so as briefly as she could, and when she had finished Marshal Henry nodded slowly and said, "You seem to have been exceedingly unfortunate, young lady. The disintegrator is an outlaw weapon." Then, to Mack, "But, young man, just how do you think your forcible entry here at gunpoint is going to get you out of your difficulties?"

"You're going to do that for us, Marshal," the photographer told him coolly. "You're going to see us safely out of this hotel to our car. So be a good chief of staff and pop into a pair of pants, won't you? I took a gamble on the boys downstairs calling your plain-clothes guards away to nab us and it paid off. But they're bound to be back in a matter of minutes. So may I suggest you hurry?" His words were polite, but there was no doubting the determination behind them.

Marshal Henry regarded Mack for another long moment, then permitted himself the faintest of smiles and moved with dignity toward a dressing chamber whose door stood open at the far side of the room. Mack moved right behind him, keeping him covered, very much on the alert for concealed weapons. But nothing untoward happened as the Columbian chief of staff donned a magnificent blue-and-silver uniform on whose chest a vast number of gay campaign and decoration ribbons glittered.

"I hope you don't expect to get away with this, young man," said the marshal, pausing as he reached the door. "I admire your nerve, but you're bound to be caught."

"Not necessarily, Marshal," said the photographer. "Shall we go?" He slipped the pistol out of sight in his pocket but held it so that it bore on the immensely tall chief of staff at all times. They rode down in the elevator without words, to the evident puzzlement of the operator.

Downstairs there was surprisingly little difficulty. The soldiery assembled in the lobby, including a quartet of young officers, were evidently too overwhelmed by the sponsorship of their chief of staff to put any overt obstacles in their path. But as they approached the outer door these men in uniform fell in silently behind and began to follow them.

"Tell them to get back and stay back," Mack whispered to the Negro marshal.

"Report to barracks for a weapons check," the huge colored man

told them with the full voice of his authority. There was no need for further commands until they reached the garage in back of the hotel, where Mack told the attendant to get out the Pipit for them. The chief of staff regarded their newly washed vehicle with thoughtful speculation.

"I'm afraid you'll never make it," he told them quietly. "I shall have to summon a hue and cry immediately if only to save my own reputation."

"In that case," said Mack sarcastically, "perhaps you'd better come along with us."

Marshal Henry unexpectedly put back his magnificent head and laughed aloud. Then he said, "My dear old chap, then there would certainly be twice as big a pursuit. No, you'll have to take your chances. I may see you sooner than you think."

His teeth flashed a brilliant white salute, and Elspeth, already seated in the Pipit, wondered what his thoughts could be. He continued to stand there, grinning at them with some vast inner amusement, as Mack scrambled into the driver's seat and got the motor going. They started and the Pipit's tires cut gravel on the court between garage and hotel.

"Mack, what are we going to do when——" Elspeth began, then gasped in quick panic as a file of lavender uniforms appeared no more than sixty yards in front of them. They carried flare-mouthed weapons that looked to Elspeth exactly like the disintegrator whose effects she had already witnessed.

"*This!*" said Mack as he gave a yank at the knob on the dashboard which released the Pipit's wings. "It's no time to hold anything back, Horelle's orders notwithstanding."

Even as he spoke, the Pipit's wings, hitherto on this strange world slotted neatly inside the top, slid rapidly out and into flight position. When he felt their tug the photographer pressed the superdrive button and the sturdy little English vehicle seemed actually to leap ahead with a new freedom. Its wheels left the gravel and automatically the engine pan dropped slightly to become a jet vent.

The bewildered soldiery were well behind and beneath before any of them could manage to open fire. Within a few tens of seconds the entire city of Baton Rouge lay a full mile below and seven or eight miles to the north of them. Its palaces and hotels and boulevards and

gardens flattened out in magic geometry along the lazy curves of the great yellow river.

"How are we going to make contact?" Elspeth asked nervously. She was beginning to feel the emotional after-effect of what they had just gone through. "Surely they must have some means of rapid communication—I saw what looked like a telegraph booth in Atlanta. And isn't someone bound to spot us between here and New Orleans?"

"Well, since we've been forced to show our hand—or rather the Pipit's wings—early, we'll have time for a diversion," Mack replied slowly, thinking his way. "We should be able to locate the arteries around New Orleans from the air and then come in by road from some unexpected direction. I don't see why we won't be able to make contact." He paused, shook his head, added, "I wonder why that disintegrator, or whatever it was you saw, seems to get everybody so steamed up."

"Did you notice that it bothered the marshal too?" Elspeth asked him.

Mack merely nodded and lifted the Pipit above a fortuitous cloud bank directly in their path. "It bothered him, all right," he said. "And it bothered the men you saw using it—and their officers. Come to think of it, our black friend did say it was outlawed. It certainly sounds deadly enough."

"It was horrible," said Elspeth, shivering. Through gaps in the clouds as they sped southward she could see the intensive development of the Lower Mississippi in this strange Republic of Columbia. From Baton Rouge to the capital itself the population was evidently very dense. It was almost built up into one huge city, with virtually no open country along the riverbanks.

They flew on, high and all but silent, above New Orleans and noted its immense sprawling expanse. Clouds sheltered them at frequent intervals, but Mack expressed little fear of being spotted in a world unused to heavier-than-air craft. He went on past New Orleans to the south. Elspeth, still suffering from reaction to the events of the early morning, relaxed uneasily and lost herself in contemplation of the cotton puffs of cloud beneath them and the birdlike shadows they cast on the checkerboard of earth still further below.

There was heavy ocean travel throughout the Delta channels and on the Gulf beyond. The smaller vessels were apparently steam-driven, but the more imposing ones, like the train and trucks they had seen

the day before, were double-hulled rocket affairs that seemed to cover the waves at extremely high speeds.

"Funny they can't fly," mused Mack. "They've got plenty of other up-to-date gadgets in this world."

"Perhaps they aren't allowed to," said Elspeth a trifle vaguely. Then, "Mack, I'm hungry. We haven't eaten a real meal since yesterday noon. Where are you bringing us down?"

"North of Pontchartrain," said the photographer. "There seems to be some open country up that way with a number of little-used roads. We ought to be able to sneak into the city all right."

Either through planning or luck they made it successfully. They paused for luncheon at an old Creole estate in the suburbs given over to a restaurant, and for once were spared the routine fried-chicken-and-grits-and-biscuits of "orthodox" southern cooking. Oysters in red-hot but delicately flavored sauce, red snapper papillon, jambalaya, fresh green salad, a sound red wine and the atmosphere of a vine-hung iron-balconied courtyard made Elspeth sigh her appreciation over sherbet and café-royales.

"I am ruind," she told Mack happily, "but it's worth it."

"Me too," he replied, rubbing his stomach. But he looked at his wrist watch and frowned. "We've got to get ourselves parked in the Hotel St. Louis before dinnertime and we're still a long way out of town. Come on—let's get going."

"You ought to be burped," said Elspeth, annoyed at the intrusion of practicality upon her satiation. They paid an unexpectedly modest check for their repast and took off again in the Pipit, once more restored to its road-running role.

Fortunately they were able to find a garage within a couple of blocks of the rear of the hotel, which faced a walled-off Canal Street. After leaving the Pipit there they walked slowly, in the hot afternoon, toward their appointed destination. Mack kept up a constant grumbling at having to carry both bags.

"Hey—what's this?" inquired the photographer when a door in the wall that barred off Canal Street opened for them as if by magic.

"Must be an electric eye or something," said Elspeth, glad that for once she had come up with a practical answer. Mack grunted unintelligibly and followed her on through, bumped into her as she stopped dead on its other side, then himself froze in equal astonishment.

"What the——" he exclaimed. The question was purely rhetorical.

It was evident now why the city's chief thoroughfare was barred to motor traffic. It was an immense moving boulevard, arranged in eight lanes, four moving in each direction. The two central lanes on either side were considerably faster than those on the borders, and there was a stationary strip in the center, designed for passengers who wished to change direction.

"Doesn't look so wonderful once you've seen it," said Mack at last, turning away. Elspeth said nothing, for once her first moment of rapture had passed at seeing such a fantastic human dream fulfilled she was forced to agree with him.

The moving road extended for several miles, its sections separated by main crossroads. Far inland, beyond a number of vehicular overpasses, could be seen the lofty neoclassic dome of a huge white building, which Elspeth judged to be the Capitol of Columbia. At the river end of the moving boulevard rose another dome atop a complex arrangement of marble arches. This, she thought, must be some sort of memorial.

Despite its sweep and vastness of concept, the moving boulevard was disappointing. Like virtually every other public project Elspeth had seen since entering this world, it appeared dingy and ill-tended. One of the fast central lanes was working faultily as it rumbled past, and noisily protested its ill-health.

She wondered how often there were breakdowns, decided that she was thinking like Mack, and resented his influence. But she followed him dutifully along one of the slow outer lanes to the Hotel St. Louis, another ornately balconied structure with a high almost cool lobby. The photographer went directly to the desk and asked a foppish octoroon assistant manager if there were a reservation and any message for Mr. Horelle. This was according to instructions.

The manager handed Mack a note and summoned a bellboy for their baggage without putting them through the routine of signing the register. Mack grinned mockingly at her in the creaky elevator. "Don't blame me if *you* have to sleep on the couch tonight," he said. "If there is a couch. Horelle arranged this."

"I could spit," she replied. But to Mack's loudly expressed disappointment they were ushered into a suite of five rooms—a drawing room, two bedrooms, two baths. It was roomier but not so lush as the single chamber they had shared in Baton Rouge.

The first thing Elspeth did was brush her teeth with the effective

powder that seemed to be standard equipment in all hotel bedrooms. Columbia, she decided, was a land of contradictions—of recent slavery, of feudal customs, of no aircraft—but also of applied rocket power, miracle toothpowder and disintegrator guns—to say nothing of moving streets.

“Hail Columbia, Happy Land,” she sang as she struggled with her hair and wondered when, if ever, she would manage a decent wave. She discovered herself out of cigarettes and wandered into the drawing room, where Mack was reading one of the books he had purchased in the Bienville House the night before.

“Help yourself,” he said, waving hospitably at a pack beside him. “Incidentally, I ordered some drinks sent up. Thought we could use them.”

“Is that all we have to do now?” she asked him.

“The word is to sit tight here until Weston’s mob makes contact,” he told her. “It seems the government is making things hot for them just now.”

“Do tell!” she replied, slightly annoyed at his lack of courtliness. There was something just a trifle *too* casual, *too* intimate, about his lack of manners. It was almost as though they were . . .

The arrival of the man with the drinks cut short that perilous line of thinking—for which she was moderately grateful. Elspeth mixed herself a highball and, while the photographer did his own honors, studied him covertly.

Certainly propinquity had failed to improve his somewhat battered features. His nose was as far off center, his eyelids as laden with scar tissue. But even so, she thought, he might be passable—even his voice—if he weren’t so damnably materialistic-minded. Which of course put him beyond the pale.

She tried to forget the fact that he had extricated her at great risk to himself from a highly combustible situation that morning in Baton Rouge. Then she caught him looking at *her* and felt herself blush and turned quickly away. A shrill piping sound from somewhere outside caught her attention.

It grew slowly louder, reminding her of scores of fire sirens stuck on one very high note. She moved instinctively toward the balcony. But Mack, rising quickly, caught her roughly by the arm and said, “Careful. Remember what happened this morning.”

“It’s not likely to happen here,” she replied, almost shouting to

make herself heard above the crescendo of high sound that now seemed right in the room with them. Freeing herself forcibly, she went to the balcony and stepped out upon it.

There was an armored motorcade approaching on one of the fast lanes that moved toward the Capitol. It was made up of small rocket cars, then trucks, then big self-propelled weapons. In its center was a large gleaming rocket car, and standing proudly erect within it was a tall military figure, magnificent in blue and silver, bowing and saluting the crowd assembled on either side of the moving boulevard. As he drew nearer Elspeth saw that it was Marshal Henry and that the crowd was cheering him madly.

Mack grasped both her shoulders to draw her quickly out of sight, but not before the Negro field marshal came abreast of their balcony. As he did so his distinguished face lifted and his teeth gleamed white in a smile while he lifted his plumed kepi in a direct and unmistakable salute.

"He *saw* us!" gasped Elspeth when they were again inside the drawing room. "Mack, we've got to get out of here. I'm scared."

"It's worse than that," said Mack, kicking gloomily at the carpet. "The big bastard knew we were here. He didn't look up by accident. We're sitting ducks."

Both of them jumped, for at that moment there was a sharp rap on the corridor door.

## CHAPTER SIX

THEY STARED at one another through a brief but pregnant moment of silence. Then Mack motioned Elspeth imperatively toward her bedroom, crossed swiftly to his own bedroom on the opposite side of the drawing room. The knock was repeated sharply twice as he emerged almost running and released the safety catch on his pistol while in motion. He held it ready and stood well back from the corridor door when he opened it.

A tall angular young man, scarecrow-lean and with a sallow face that seemed impervious to the hot Louisiana sun, came in and then stopped short at sight of Mack and his automatic. His light blue eyes flashed panic signals and he turned nervously to Elspeth, who stood in her bedroom doorway, watching. Then he turned back to the photographer with a helpless gesture. He laughed uneasily, stroked a thin mustache that outlined his upper lip.

"Really!" he exclaimed, and his accent sounded more British than that of any Britisher Elspeth had ever heard. "*Really*, old man, take it easy. I'm van Hooten. I'm here to direct you to Reed Weston. So put that ironmongery down like a good chap, won't you, old boy?"

Elspeth dusted off a smile of greeting and broke it out for their visitor—but Mack motioned her back with his left hand before she could take two steps toward him. Keeping the newcomer carefully covered, the photographer peered quickly out into the hall, satisfied himself that van Hooten was alone, then slammed the door shut and bolted it. He studied their Anglicized invader with narrow appraisal and said, "Haven't you forgotten something—van Hooten?"

"Eh? What's that you say? Forgotten something? Surely you're spoofing, old boy." Van Hooten spoke with crisp uncertainty and again achieved a laugh. His height matched that of the photographer almost exactly, but his build was so much slighter and his posture so much more erect that he seemed a far taller man. He followed his laugh with a smirk, then plucked a silk handkerchief from his sleeve and began to mop his brow delicately.

"I'm waiting," Mack said ominously. Elspeth felt her stomach muscles tighten in sympathy as the photographer pushed his pistol closer to the abdomen of the intruder.

A spark of sudden enlightenment glowed in van Hooten's pale blue eyes. "Oh, of course!" he exclaimed. "How utterly stupid of me—eh,



old fellow? The password. But, d'you know, you quite frightened it out of me. Wilkinson, isn't it?"

"You don't sound exactly sure of it," said Mack. But he appeared satisfied. At any rate, he slipped the automatic into the waistband of his slacks and extended his right hand in greeting, adding, "We've not been waiting for you very long. Thank God you're prompt."

"Prompt—*haw!*" exploded van Hooten, eying Elspeth with overt curiosity. Then, to both of them, "As a matter of fact, I'm bloody damn early. Just fool's luck, my catching you here a bit ahead of the game. There's the very devil to pay just now. Raids, tipoffs, a regular housecleaning. Bally bad show."

"In that case we'd better get out of here as fast as possible," said Mack thoughtfully. He was studying van Hooten, and seemed to be having considerable difficulty in assessing him. He took a cigarette himself, tossed the pack to Elspeth, accepted the flame of van Hooten's expensive-looking gold lighter. He said, "We had a bit of trouble ourselves in Baton Rouge this morning."

"Bit of a muck, eh? Heard about it, in fact," said their eccentric contact. He *haw-hawed* again heartily. "It's all over the place, old chap. Must have been a delightful rumpus, trapping the dear old marshal in his scanties." He *hawed* once more, then turned to Elspeth and said directly, "You may call me Everard, my dear."

"And you," said Elspeth, who had no desire to be stampeded even into enmity by this orchidaceous creature, "may call me Miss Marriner—a privilege I permit only my most *intimate* friends."

"*Haw-haw!*" exploded Everard, but his eyes were like ice. "Very amusing indeed, my dear. Such a love!"

"If you two will stop clowning for just a moment," said Mack with a Job-ish expression, "we have good reason to believe Marshal Henry knows we are here. He lifted his cap to us just now when he went by in the parade."

"But it's the talk of the town, dear ones," said van Hooten, dismissing the fact of their discovery with the graceful flick of a well-manicured hand. "Everyone in the know has been expecting you for absolutely days now."

"But Marshal Henry knows we are here in this hotel—in this suite," Mack said doggedly, bristling at the other's frivolity. "I think it's time to move on—and right away."

"But that simply can't *be!*" said Everard, who seemed to talk habitu-

ally in exclamation points. "I mean, it actually isn't possible that the marshal should have——"

He was interrupted sharply by another knock on the corridor door. Once again Mack moved swiftly to answer it, pistol ready in his hand. But this time it was only the room-service boy with the check for the drinks, which he had forgotten to bring with him on his earlier trip. Trying not to show his relief, Mack paid the check, tipped the boy, waved him on his way.

He turned on van Hooten, looking grim. "You know where Reed Weston is, van Whooping, or whatever your name is. Your job is to get us to him. *Do it.*"

"As a matter of fact, it's not quite so simple as all that," said their appointed guide with an air of resentment. Then, with a shrug that could only be described as dainty, "But I suppose we *had* better hop to it if we wish to get out of here. Your duffle all packed and puckered?"

Elspeth and Mack were ready to move on in a matter of minutes. Just before they braved the perils of corridor, lift, and lobby, Mack said, "I suppose they expect us to provide the transportation?"

"But, dear old chap, that's the teetotal idea!" exclaimed Everard, again looking shocked. With his silken sleeve kerchief he patted perspiration from his forehead as delicately as a cat. "You have simply *no* idea of the appalling uproar you dear people caused at Baton Rouge this morning when you lifted your little old car right into the air—*brrrrrrppppppp*—and under the very muzzles of the marshal's personal bodyguard! The wires have been really buzzing with it ever since."

"All right then," said Mack, who was becoming even more misanthropic than usual under the impact of Everard's highly effeminate effluvia. His lips were tight to invisibility as he led the way out of the hotel. Once more Elspeth found herself carrying her own suitcase. But Mack had to have one hand free on his pistol and she sensed that Everard was scarcely the type to offer help with anything heavier than a lipstick container.

They emerged from the Hotel St. Louis and walked to the garage without hindrance or incident of any kind, much to Elspeth's surprise and relief. She consoled herself, as they crept at half speed over the unevenly paved streets in the faithful Pipit, with the thought that she was apparently not going to spend the night in a prison cell. But all the same, the luxury of the hotel and its concomitants of bath, good

food, and comfortable bed made her regret their hurried departure.

Sitting on the front seat between the two men, she let her imagination rove over the possibility of a bit of verse anent the creature comforts so summarily abandoned. She gave it a working title of *Champagne and Suds* and decided it would be a simple little quatrain, a sort of gay girl's lament, with none of the abstract frills and murky hidden meanings of free verse. It should rhyme tidily, she decided further, and consist of three quatrains with an unexpected little rhyme break in the middle of each line.

The beat—she experimented with a couplet—should be basically simple, even iambic, a meter she usually shunned like the plague. In more thoughtful compositions she could not abide that basis of doggerel—but then this was not really a thoughtful idea. It was not even much emotionally—just a fragment, a thought nonetheless universal for being so light.

She began to consider what things she missed most when she no longer had them. There was, of course, that dreadful thing of Kipling—in which “a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke.” Barely realizing she was doing it, she began to think about men and women—or, rather, about women and men.

The three quatrains became a sonnet, then three sestets, for the mood of her composition would never carry the stateliness of the fourteen-line form. And of course, the mood itself began to change on her. She could, she decided, get in a lick or two for her own sex. Perhaps. The word “perhaps” was in itself important. She considered ways and means, finally achieved

*... a man, perhaps, although a sigh  
Is all collapse of each and all my love  
Has left me with. How much more dearly I  
Prefer the myth that liquor dies with cloves  
Or that my firm-fleshed skin will never dry  
Nor my poor hands grow thin, force me to gloves.*

It was complex and scarcely light any more—but it would do very nicely for the third sestet. She rather liked the aa-bb-cc of the inside rhyme scheme against the ab-ab-ab of the final syllables. But she was still left with only the caboose of her poem. She began to build her idea-structure laboriously back through a second sestet toward the first . . .

She was rudely jolted out of her creative abstraction when Mack,

without even a warning grunt, reached rudely across her to take a map which Everard van Hooten had pulled from his pocket. The Pipit was parked at one side of a broad palm-lined avenue on the southern outskirts of the great city and the afternoon sun was already well down in the western sky.

Mack muttered unintelligibly as he perused the map. His forehead corrugated in its familiar frown while he studied their course. Finally he looked up and said to van Hooten, "It takes us awfully close to the Rio Grande. How come? I thought Weston was supposed to be up in the Ozarks."

Van Hooten dismissed this with another of his patented graceful gestures. He said, buffing his nails assiduously on the flaring lapel of his jacket, "Oh, poor Mr. Weston has to keep moving his headquarters around." Then, dropping his too-British voice to a whisper, "Confidentially, he has arranged a secret meeting with an envoy of the Emperor. He's running himself simply ragged, poor man, in an effort to put a stop to this silly old war."

"Ummm," said Mack with what Elspeth decided was his usual garrulity. Then, after studying the map further, he handed it back to Everard. "All right if you say so. We'll give it a try anyway."

"Stout chappie," said Everard, flashing his nervous grin. "Tell me, are you actually going to take this miracle hus of yours right up into the air—with all of us in it?"

"Once we're clear of the city and it gets a bit darker," Mack informed him. "Otherwise we'll be days on the road and probably get picked up by a Columbian patrol."

"Goodness!" exclaimed van Hooten, and Elspeth could actually feel him shiver against her side. "This is a bit of a thrill, isn't it, old man?"

"Are you British, Everard?" Elspeth asked him.

He turned to regard her, his sallow countenance alight with joy. "But of course not—hardly!" he gushed, added, "And how utterly divine of you to have said so. I come from outside of Boston, you know, and in that region we value our British ancestry *most* highly. I *couldn't* be more pleased with you."

"And I couldn't be more sleepy," said Elspeth, vainly trying to suppress a yawn that all but cracked the hinges of her jaw. The strain of the last week, the continued presence of danger all about them, had combined to induce in her a sudden and unfigtable fatigue. She

remarked, "If you two supermen don't mind too much, I'd like to curl up in the back seat for a nap."

"But of course—you poor dear!" said Everard, opening the door and getting out to make room for her to effect the transfer. Mack, barely turning his head, said, "Good idea, Elly. You may need it. I may want you to drive later while I nap myself."

She gave him one of her special Mack looks and scrambled gracelessly into the back of the Pipit. Mack got them under way almost at once, but Elspeth made herself reasonably comfortable on the broad seat cushion—and of course immediately ceased to be sleepy any more. She lay there, watching frequent palms and increasingly less frequent buildings flash by. She speculated on what was going to happen next.

Strange world or no, Everard simply didn't ring true. She discounted his blatant effeminacy, of course. But even so he seemed a most unlikely sort of secret agent to be operating for either the stalwart idealistic Reed Weston or the aristocratic Mr. Horelle. And his actions negated any idea that he might be working for the Columbian Republic.

His effeteness, she decided, could be traced back to the fact that he came from the inbred Northeast, whose best blood had been siphoned off in the gutters of a civil war almost a century earlier. But his loquacity made him a most unlikely selection for secret missions—unless, of course, he were far more clever than he seemed and employed his gush of asinine chatter as camouflage in preference to the gaunt secrecy of silence.

Mack, she knew from numerous small symptoms, was also dissatisfied with Everard—but he was perforce accepting him as the sole presently available instrument of escape from the trap closing around them in New Orleans. And now Everard wanted to lead them almost to the border of Empire territory—along with the Pipit, an almost incredibly valuable piece of property in a world that knew no airplanes.

It was hot, and not even the speeding Pipit could stir a breeze in the hot late-afternoon air. While they were still on the ground Elspeth did manage to doze off, sweatily uncomfortable, into a series of unpleasant dreams in one of which an immense ebony field marshal with a disintegrator blasted an orchidaceous Mack Fraser, who had a purple bee tattooed in back of his left ear.

She flung herself between them, but was just too late to save either of them. Her dust and Mack's and that of the orchidaceous one—

suddenly no longer Mack—eddiied and whirled and intermingled as it rose slowly into an orange twilight, and the ebony field marshal grew in height to match theirs and his teeth flashed like rows of mammoths' tusks as once more he aimed the dreadful flare muzzle of the disintegrator at them. This time it meant . . .

She awoke with a horrid start, and for a moment it seemed that her dream was reality. Then she realized that they were actually flying through the dusk with the sunset ahead and a trifle to starboard. She shook herself and shivered, for it was blessedly cool after the New Orleans swelter. Briefly, as the half awake will, she pondered the apparent reality of her dream.

She stretched and yawned and pushed back her hair. Then, fully awake, she fumbled for her handbag, found the Pipit's light switch and pressed it. She gasped at what her short nap had done to her already scrambled grooming.

"Turn off that light," snapped Mack. "We're too low."

She did so but not before she had again seen the purple bee. It was there—half hidden by the neat fringe of his haircut—behind Everard's left ear. She must have subconsciously noted it earlier and recalled it while asleep. A silly sort of adornment for such an exquisite as Everard to indulge in—but she supposed it was one of the absurd foibles the Everards of this and all other worlds delight in. She wondered why it had disturbed . . .

And then the alarm bells began to toll once more—inside her head. She saw, as clearly as if she had an X ray that could read whatever secret papers Everard carried, why he wore the purple-bee tattoo. She knew what he was and where he intended taking them.

They altered course then, causing the sun to shift further to starboard, and the tattoo vanished. Apparently it had to be seen from just the right angle—with the light coming from beneath and very flat. Otherwise, even with the shortest of haircuts, it would not be visible at all.

The bee—ageless symbol of the Napoleonic Empire—and purple, the Imperial color. She should, of course, have realized its implications at once—or at any rate in conjunction with van Hooten's unsuitability as an agent for either Weston or the Republic and his insistence upon taking them so close to the Border.

But in her world there was no Napoleonic Mexican Empire, and New England was not a drained-out defeatist area of small opportunity

for a young man—if Everard actually qualified as a man. It was entirely understandable from a psychological viewpoint. Unable to endure the conditions of life in his home, unable to feel sympathy for the rude vigor of the Reed Weston revolt, he would have been drawn to the Empire as to a lodestone. And what more natural than that the Empire should put him to work as a secret agent?

Elspeth saw it as clearly as if Everard had told her—but what to do about it was something else again. If Everard were armed, as he probably was, he would take advantage of any diversion she might make and force them to fly to Mexico. Or he might have a disintegrator weapon himself. He would not use it on both of them, for they were the only persons in this world who could fly and, even more important, land the Pipit. But used against either one of them it would be tragic enough.

So Elspeth sat there and battled her suddenly galloping nerves and wondered what to do. In this she could not rely on Mack. Everard was far too sensitive not to see through at once any double talk she might make in an effort to warn the photographer. And Mack's sensitivities were by no means so acute.

They flew on toward the Southwest in the gathering dusk and Elspeth desperately sought a plan of action, for she was going to have to act both soon and effectively. She rummaged in her handbag in search of something that would do double duty as a weapon.

It held nothing. The pencil of rouge with which she tinted her lips was of too small a bore—especially since Everard had seen Mack's pistol—to bluff him. A hairpin would not unlock this puzzle. She lifted the bag to discard it in its uselessness.

Of course—the bag itself would do. It was a rectangular affair constructed about a frame of heavy metal with sharp corners. British-made, there was nothing flimsy about it. If she could manage to bring one of its corners down sharply on one of Everard's temples it ought at least to stun him briefly.

She eyed him tensely, gripping the bag tightly, seeking the exact moment and spot to strike. She would have but one real chance and that would have to be good. Chills were rising through her body like smoke rings from a Red Indian's signal fire.

Suddenly he flung an arm over the back of the seat and turned toward her, his face alight with excitement. "Isn't flying simply *too* tremendous?" he offered enthusiastically.

"It can grow very dull once you're accustomed to it," she replied and noted with some surprise that her voice was steady.

He uttered some further banalities, to which she managed to muster equally banal replies. She wondered when if ever he was going to turn around once more. At last she saw a cluster of lights ahead and asked him what city they were approaching.

"*Jove!*" he exclaimed. "That must be Dallas. See, Fort Worth lies just beyond. Dreadful sinkhole, that cowtown. It——"

Elspeth struck then, swiftly, hard, with a prayer in her heart. Her aim was true—the corner of the bag caught him just above and in front of his left ear as he leaned slightly forward, the better to see the view out the window beside and ahead of him.

There were a surprisingly light shock of contact and a dull *thock* as Elspeth's blow hit home. She had a horrid moment of choking fear in which it seemed as if she could not have struck hard enough to accomplish anything at all. Her panic endured while Everard continued to lean forward. Then slowly his trunk began to slip. His knees hinged as his hams slid off the seat and he crumpled against the corner of the cabin, his head lolling drunkenly. A dark trickle began to crawl slowly from his left temple down toward his cheek-bone.

"What the hell!" said Mack, looking at Everard, then at Elspeth, who was crouched in the back, her handbag raised to strike again if necessary. His eyes popped as he saw her. Apparently he thought she was out of her mind.

"Turn on the autocon," she told him. "We've got to tie Everard up and search him. He's an Imperialist spy."

"You're crazy if you——" Mack began. Then his eyes narrowed and he pressed the automatic control switch and turned on the cabin light. The air was steady under the Pipit and she flew on toward Mexico. He dragged the unconscious Everard up onto the seat and, with Elspeth's aid, got him into the back and laid him out.

"That was quite a wallop you handed him," said the photographer unemotionally. "What makes you think he's a spy, Elly?"

She told him. Although she had to explain the significance of the bee, Mack did not laugh at her, somewhat to her surprise. Instead he regarded her gravely and said, "Thanks. I've been smelling something odd about Everard ever since he barged into the picture—and I don't mean his perfume."

"Mack!" said Elspeth with horror, "you don't suppose I——"



"You didn't kill him," said Mack, unperturbed. "Come on—before he comes to—let's see what he's got on him."

They found a flat little weapon, something like a pistol in shape but very different in detail if not in purpose. It was in a cleverly concealed holster built in where the watch pocket of his trousers should have been. Mack regarded it dubiously. "Of course it's not proof," he said. "Wonder what it does."

"Don't try it here," said Elspeth, practical for once. "It might burn a hole in the Pipit. Mack, he's coming to!"

She gasped this last as a surprisingly steady hand suddenly gripped her wrist and she found herself staring into a pair of malevolent ice-blue eyes whose viciousness went beyond anything in her previous experience.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"TELL ME—why did you hit me?" Everard van Hooten asked softly. His voice was still low and well modulated, but its pink-tea tones had been replaced by the malevolence that showed in his eyes. It had the softness of a snake's hiss.

"All right," said Elspeth frankly. "It was because I caught sight of the purple bee tattooed behind your ear." She struggled a little, seeking ineffectually to break Everard's grip on her wrist, added, "That meant you were directing us into an Imperialist trap."

For a long and painful moment the cold blue eyes continued to bore into hers. The unexpectedly powerful fingers continued to bruise the flesh of her wrist. She moaned a little, said, "Mack, he's hurting me! Make him let go."

"All right, van Hooten, cut it out," Mack commanded, and the pistol in his hand rose in preparation for a chopping blow. Everard caught the photographer's gesture out of the corner of an eye, permitted himself a slight shrug, then released Elspeth with a wry smile of resignation to his fate.

"Oh, very well then," he said with apparent good humor. "I'll try to be good. I shouldn't have lost my temper just then, but the young lady made me so *darned* mad."

"You aren't really mad at her," said Mack unexpectedly. "You're only mad at yourself for letting her knock you cold." His insight surprised her and she felt a sudden glow of pride in her recent achievement. But then she caught sight of the dark blood still trickling down the van Hooten temple and pride vanished before a desire to be sick. She had always loathed violence and physical force of all descriptions.

Everard gave vent to a dry little laugh. "I don't suppose that there's much sense in seeking to dupe you two charming people now," he said and mopped the blood from his temple with his sleeve kerchief. He regarded the resultant stain with evident distaste.

"You did very well up to a point," Elspeth told him with a degree of sympathy. "I suppose it was bad luck rather than any failure of yours that betrayed you. But the answer from now on is a resounding no."

"Oh, very well then," Everard repeated with a tone of resignation. He seemed to be still the exquisite if no longer so offensively so. He regarded them thoughtfully, added, "I shall now put my cards on the table. You may find my offer more interesting than you think."

"We might," said Mack, watching him carefully, "but the answer would still be no."

"Gad, one of those inflexible characters," sighed the fair Everard. "But I'll show you my cards, nonetheless. Yes, I work for the Mexican Emperor. We received word some days ago that Reed Weston was about to acquire something exceptional from the East. So of course when word of your remarkable escape from Baton Rouge reached New Orleans this morning, we knew that it was time to act."

"It seems to me that you would be more at home on Reed Weston's side of the fence in view of the situation between Columbia and the Empire," Mack said speculatively. Without taking his eyes from van Hooten, he handed Elspeth his automatic and added, "Keep him covered with this every minute, especially if he pretends to go to sleep, Elly. You can do better than I from the rear seat."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Everard. "Careful codgers, aren't you?" He again indulged in his inimitable shrug, then went on with. "However. I can't really say that I blame you. To return to our previous line of converse, my dear Fraser, my affairs aren't quite that simple—nor are those of the Empire. Granted, our rulers have no intention of losing a war to the Columbian Republic. Still, we cannot find much to favor in Reed Weston and his rag-tag-and-bobtail anarchists and agitators.

"We would like to have Weston on our side in the coming struggle. In this way we could better manage to hold his ambitions within reasonable bounds. Then, too, he—or, rather, his group—has developed some weapons that might prove decisive if turned against Columbia.

"Naturally, since this flying machine of yours seems to be one of the things that is important to Weston, we decided it must be important to us. And frankly, dear people, after traveling in it I have no doubt at all that your Pipit—quaint name that—will not only win us any war Columbia may elect to wage but will probably prevent any such war from occurring."

"And it is your idea that we should stop this war by turning our Pipit over to the Empire—just like that?" said Elspeth thoughtfully.

"But of course," said van Hooten, apparently surprised at her question. "That's why I'm here."

"By the way," Mack asked him quietly, "just how did you manage to make contact with us so neatly?"

"Oh, really!" Everard's tone was utterly patronizing. "We have our Empire cells, of course, planted within both factions north of the

Border. Hence the obtaining of your itinerary and password and the preventing of Weston's agents from fulfillment of their assignments was scarcely a difficult matter to arrange. Actually, some of our agents in the Columbian service will receive decorations from President Wilkinson himself for their work in exposing Weston's spies."

"Well, you're certainly frank about it," said Elspeth, wondering whether she didn't actually prefer the false van Hooten she had unmasked to this cold-bloodedly efficient machine. "You wish us to work for a *pax Mexicana*."

"Is it really so important?" Everard inquired with still another shrug. "It will be someone's peace, come what may. In the years ahead it will scarcely matter. And the Empire is in a position to reward you far more extensively for your services and that of the Pipit than any other faction involved."

He looked from one to the other and his eyes narrowed slightly. His voice acquired a flavor of honey as he added, "Money, of course—all you will ever want and more. And there are other possibilities only an Imperial regime can offer—say your choice of some of the finest estates in the Empire, assured position, a title. We pay well those who work in our service."

Elspeth, in spite of herself and to her considerable horror, was tempted. She had a sudden vision of what her life would be like as a great and noble and rich lady in a magnificent colonnaded white palace—say in the hills of Guatemala—surrounded by servants, by every conceivable luxury, by fertile lands whose harvests, sowed and reaped by human chattels, would provide for her in magnificence for life. The poetry she would have time to write under such conditions, the . .

"By the way," said Mack with a notable lack of enthusiasm. "How does it happen, van Hooten, that such a number of fine estates in the Empire should be without owners?"

Everard made a deprecatory gesture, followed by his shrug. "Oh, people die," he told them airily. "And of course those who die without issue or heir—well, occasionally their estates revert to the crown."

"I see," said Mack. Then, stubbornly, "But *how* do they die—and why?"

Everard's offhand casualness was visibly shaken by the photographer's line of questioning. But he said, "Naturally, even the Empire is not Utopia. However, neither of you will have a thing to worry about,

not with your knowledge of this flying device—and doubtless of other things unknown to us.”

“Oh, fine,” said Mack sharply. “Great! Now tell me—where do we find Reed Weston?”

“And why should I know that?” countered van Hooten, openly laughing at the photographer.

“Because you knew how where, and when to find us,” said Mack flatly. Elspeth, who was beginning to understand him better, sensed the terrible anger gathering within him and felt a sort of reluctant admiration stir within her. He was completely strong, so utterly incorruptible, so . . .

All at once she snapped out of it with a jar. “Mack!” she cried. “He’s stringing us along—playing for time! We’ll be over the Border before long and our fuel load won’t last forever. Turn north, Mack! Turn north now.”

Van Hooten proceeded to call Elspeth an unspeakable epithet with a venom that struck her almost like a physical blow. At this Mack made a quick motion as if to lay his fists on the Imperial agent where they would do the most good.

However, he managed to get control of himself instead, and wordlessly snapped off the autocon and took over the steering wheel himself, banking the Pipit in a sharp right turn. At this threat to the fulfillment of his mission Everard stirred rebelliously. Elspeth jabbed the muzzle of Mack’s automatic hard against the back of his neck.

“Better sit still,” she told him firmly. “Killing you would be a pleasure.” Then, to Mack, “How about Fort Smith? We *know* that it’s a Reed Weston base. Do you think we can make it on what we’ve got in the tanks?”

“Not a chance, Elly,” he replied, shaking his head. “We’ll have to hit earth somewhere and soon. Keep your eyes open for an unoccupied highway, will you?”

“Right,” said the girl, wondering how she could do so and still keep dear Everard under control. But somehow she found herself able to manage.

They brought the Pipit down some forty minutes later on a deserted stretch of one-strip highway, somewhere between Fort Worth and a large town to the north—non-existent in Mack’s and Elspeth’s world—known as Wilkinson City. The fuel gauge already registered below zero and both of them were edgy.

Everard, on the contrary, seemed to have relaxed into a state of blissful content. He had spoken only briefly and politely from the moment Mack announced that they would have to hit the earth soon. In fact he had scarcely moved save to light, smoke, and discharge through the window an occasional gold-tipped monogrammed cigarette.

The Pipit was rolling uneasily up a long, very flat hill—an apparent rarity in the endless flatland around them—when a sudden bright glow above its top caused Elspeth to hope that they were approaching some sort of community in which they could purchase the fuel that would enable them to continue their air journey to Forth Smith.

But Mack, giving the wheel a sharp turn, suddenly turned the Pipit to the right and off the road, jouncing them right through a shallow ditch and part way across a lumpy field. At Elspeth's involuntary cry of protest he said, "Those lights are moving, Elly—and moving our way. For the love of Pete, watch Everard, will you?"

"I'm extremely comfortable, thank you," said van Hooten. The smile with which he accompanied the words—it was unmistakably present in his voice—was invisible as Mack cut the lights of the Pipit. He brought the sturdy little vehicle to a jerky halt.

He had scarcely done so when the first pair of headlights—they had a distinct yellow sodium glow that was, to Elspeth, oddly sinister—topped the crest of the gentle rise. As it came down the road, followed by other similar two-eyed monsters, it seemed to be moving straight down on the Pipit, jet exhausts flaming brilliantly in the darkness.

For one instant, despite her sharp awareness of Everard as a potentially deadly threat, Elspeth's attention was irresistibly attracted by the terrible yet majestic spectacle of the heavy military convoy as it sped along the highway and past them, no more than a hundred yards away.

The Columbian tanks and trucks and armored and supply vehicles and self-propelled rocket chargers moved with a hissing of powerful jets that drowned out the rumbling roar of their heavy wheels on the road. Evidently the caterpillar tread, like the airplane, was not a feature of the Columbian world. But the wheels which supported the multiton vehicles were ugly, powerful and complex in construction.

In the glare of the sodium headlights and the lurid flare of the jet exhausts, the uniformed men, riding the trucks and ensconced atop the larger armored cars and tanks, looked literally like demons from some ghastly underworld. And the snouts of the weapons themselves.

without exception pointing rearward, and tarpaulin-covered as protection against exhaust flares and dust, were as alien and dead in appearance. The entire long convoy appeared unworldly—as indeed, Elspeth thought, it was.

“Goddammit, Elly, I told you to watch him!” Mack exploded suddenly and wrathfully. Elspeth, who had become utterly entranced by the eerie spectacle of the convoy, became aware with a sickening sense of guilt that Everard had vanished from the Pipit. The open door on his side of the little vehicle told its story all too plainly.

Quickly Elspeth slid into the seat vacated by the Imperialist agent and slammed and locked the door and closed its non-shatterable glass window, told Mack to do the same on his side. Thus they were reasonably safe from any counter-attack while waiting for the convoy to pass.

Mack muttered a full roll call of curses and derogatory remarks anent females in general and female poetesses in particular until Elspeth felt guilt give way to resentment. Then she asked him sharply why, if he were so alert, he hadn’t given her warning of Everard’s flight. Also, whether he still had the spy’s pistol.

“The low-down degenerate so-and-so must have picked my pocket!” the photographer almost shouted when he discovered that the strange little weapon was missing. “Come on we’ve got to get out of here before he manages to get that convoy aware of us. Hang on and let’s get going.”

It was a rugged take-off and a dangerous one for several reasons besides their shortage of fuel. Among them were the darkness, the rugged terrain, the possible proximity of Everard and his alien weapon, the nearness of the Columbian convoy. But the Pipit again proved her worth by getting up off the ground without mishap and, more important, apparently without drawing notice from the soldiery riding southward along the unlit highway.

“If the fuel gives out we’re gone geese,” said Mack grimly. But they managed to top the hill easily and, at a safe altitude, spotted the tail of the convoy in the act of surmounting it and—with relief—a small city no more than five miles ahead of them.

They came down beyond sight of the soldiery and managed to reach a fuel station on the outskirts of what proved to be, according to map and sign, Burrville. The Pipit’s motor gave a final despairing cough as they rolled up in front of the pump.

The station attendant was curious about the Pipit, but Mack once

more safely passed it off by explaining that their vehicle was of new British make. They got their tank full and decided to spend the night in Burrville if they could find lodgings in reasonable safety.

As if to make up for their troubles since early morning the night passed without incident. They had no trouble getting a suite of surprisingly clean and modern rooms in a clean and modern hotel. On a card hanging from the drawing room door of their suite hung a sign with the legend—

YOU WANT IT? WE HAVE IT! IF WE HAVEN'T WE'LL GET IT—ASK US!

"Texas," said Elspeth, smiling, "is evidently Texas no matter what world it's in. Want a nice redhead, Mack? Just ask."

"You're about as funny as Everard," said Mack, scowling. "Listen, Elly—let's turn in and get some sleep. For all we know tomorrow may be worse than today."

Elspeth got her second decent night's sleep since leaving New York—her first since the departure from Mr. Horelle's mysterious house of many worlds. Once again she was up before Mack, who seemed to be feeling the rigors of their expedition increasingly. She ordered breakfast sent up for both of them and passed the time until its arrival reading the newspaper that had been stuck beneath her door during the night.

It was a highly lurid gazette, its front page sprinkled with bright green headlines in large type. There was a lead story about a young lady who had ridden in from her ranch in some sort of an automobile and had run amok in the night-club belt after a prodigious amount of imbibing. This was not in itself remarkable, save for the fact that the young lady wore only a ten-gallon hat and a pair of cowboy boots while on her spree.

There was a feature about a famous Parisian actress, who declared the mountain lions of Texas as the only fitting pets and playmates for a woman of true spirit. She had promptly been presented with a half dozen of the large and ferocious beasts—for which she was bringing suit against the donors on charges of shredding not only her nerves but her wardrobe and apartment *décor*.

There were a pair of sports pages in which Elspeth found little of interest. Then came a few items of news, hung beneath their respective date lines in a single inside column. It was the second of these that brought Elspeth out of her chair in a hurry.



It stated in brief and obviously censored language that Reed Weston's Norman, Oklahoma, headquarters had announced a visit by envoys of the Mexican Empire, and claimed that this proved definitely the rebel Weston's utter and complete perfidy where the welfare of his native Columbia was concerned.

Mack had emerged from his bedroom, yawning and rubbing his eyes, by the time the waiter arrived with the food she had ordered. He at once got to work on an amazing Texas breakfast of red-hot steak *á la ranchera*, *huevos rancheros*, frijoles and chile con carne, washed down with chicory-packed black Mexican coffee.

"Take a look at this, Mack," said Elspeth when he had eaten all he could hold. "It should shorten our journey considerably."

Mack read the item, laid it down, slammed it with the flat of a hand. "So he's still moving south. Well, that's swell for us. On the strength of spotting that and after ordering this breakfast you're in good again, Elly."

"I couldn't care less," she retorted acidly. Mack merely gave vent to a snort and went back to his room to dress.

They drove out of Burrville without incident of note and took off shortly after leaving the city limits from a lonely and flat stretch of road. Thanks to Everard's map, Mack had small trouble plotting a course for Norman. Elspeth, sensing that their incredible assignment was all but concluded, to say nothing of feeling clean, rested, and refreshed, was almost gay as they sped high above the checker-board of the country beneath them.

"It's odd," she said to Mack when they had been airborne about an hour, "that the paper said so little about the war."

"I don't believe," Mack offered, "that many people in this world believe war is actually coming. They've managed to live for a long time without it."

"Then there probably wouldn't have been war anyway," said Elspeth, studying a swallow-shaped cloud perhaps a mile under them. "I mean, even if we hadn't brought the Pipit."

"There probably would have been—and still will be if we fail to fulfill our mission," said Mack sternly. "These people lack experience of war, so they don't know they're almost in one. Only folk like Mr. Horelle and this Everard seem to understand."

"I'm glad he got away," said Elspeth impulsively.

"I'm not," said Mack, "even though I'm damned if I know what we

could have done with him—except maybe kill him.”

“Mack!” exclaimed Elspeth, shocked at his violence. “You don’t mean it—do you, Mack?”

“Never more so,” said the photographer. “That Everard is about the most dangerous bloke I ever met—and I won’t feel safe in this world so long as he’s still around. He may look and talk like a prime pansy, but believe me, he’s cute and he’s tough.”

“Ummmmm,” said Elspeth. She didn’t want to talk any more—she wanted to get back to her sense of well-being. They flew on in silence until, close to their destination, Mack uttered a startled exclamation and peered out the window on his side.

“For the love of heaven,” he whispered, “look at that!”

He banked the Pipit so that Elspeth was able to follow his gaze. Some nine thousand feet below, in the concave flat center of a hill-ringed valley, was a large clearing, surrounded by low buildings that seemed to blend with the landscape around them.

In the center of the clearing, held upright by elaborate metal scaffolding, rose a gigantic silver bullet around which men were moving with the labored slowness of worker ants. Its size was immense, judged by the late-morning shadow it cast, which reached almost to the row of buildings to its west. It looked as unlike something from the Columbian world as it did like anything from the world of Elspeth and Mack.

“What is it?” the girl asked curiously.

“I may be crazy,” said Mack, “but it looks to me like a space ship.”

“A space ship!” Elspeth echoed inanely. She peered at it more curiously, aware that she was staring at a near-fulfillment of one of man’s oldest dreams. Then, as they sped on past, she asked, “Does it look to you as if it would work?”

“Can’t tell from here. Elly,” he told her, “but it’s mighty impressive. This Reed Weston must be *something* if his boys have built that in this scientific scrambled egg of a world.”

Elspeth thought more about it as they landed on one of the roads leading to Norman. Horelle had told her nothing of such a development. He had, in fact, been a little vague about Reed Weston and his plans, beyond saying that they needed the Pipit desperately. The idea of travel to the planets, perhaps to the stars, was suddenly and deeply stirring.

“You know, I’m beginning to find this exciting,” she said dreamily while Mack sped the Pipit along the highway to the city.

"Yeah," said Mack. "More than I like—Look out!"

He braked violently, just in time to avoid crashing into a large armored vehicle which had suddenly pulled across the pavement in front of them. In quick order they were arrested and were driven to a business-looking sort of building by a wordless and highly efficient soldier. Mack tried to protest, but they were told politely but firmly to shut up, were hustled into a large office in which a tall man in uniform stood behind a desk.

His skin was coal-black—his hair snow-white. He was Marshal Henry, Chief of Staff of the Columbian Army!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

ELSPETH FELT sudden and sickening sense of failure. They had managed to come so far in this alien world—and they had endured so much. She glanced quickly, covertly, at Mack for encouragement, but the bleakness of his expression sent her already sagging morale plummeting to a new low. It was all too evident that he, like herself, realized their travail had been all for nothing. The appearance of Marshal Henry here in Reed Weston's headquarters was as much a wallop to him as to herself.

"Please sit down, my young friends," the black marshal said politely, leaning forward to rest his knuckles on the desk. "I'm sorry that this is so much of a shock—but please remember, you gave me quite a shock yesterday morning." His white teeth flashed again as he smiled.

"I'm sorry—I'm afraid I just don't get it," said Mack, sinking weak-kneed into one of the large overstuffed leather armchairs with which the big office was liberally equipped. Speechless for once in her highly articulate life, Elspeth followed the photographer's example. On top of the surprise of his presence here, Marshal Henry's manner toward them was so unmistakably good-humored. It didn't make sense . . .

"Your confusion is understandable, of course," said the huge Negro to Mack. "If I had not permitted a certain regrettable inherited love for the theatrical to overcome my good sense yesterday afternoon in New Orleans, we might have been able to make the trip here together. As it was, my agents were exactly five minutes too late at the hotel. But since you have managed to find your own way here—let me assure you you are welcome."

"But, Marshal Henry," said Elspeth, so perplexed she all but wailed, "whose side are you on? We thought—" She stammered, aware of the thin ice upon which she was treading. "I mean, from what we've heard—"

"I think I can pretty well guess what your thoughts must be," said Marshal Henry in his deep and richly pleasant tones. "Unfortunately we had neither time nor opportunity to talk together either yesterday or the evening before I was on my way to a conference with the President's personal secretary in my suite when we met in the elevator."

He paused, shook his noble head, added, "And yesterday morning conditions were scarcely propitious for lengthy conversation. Incidentally, Miss Marriner, I am deeply indebted to you for the information that the Presidential Guards are actually using the disintegrator. The knowledge hastened my move here, of course."

"Is—whatever it is—outlawed?" Elspeth asked quickly. "I can still see that poor man's feet running even after they had disappeared." She shuddered.

"It is outlawed by every recognized civilized government in the world." Marshal Henry spoke with a lurking anger that made his eyes gleam almost red. "It was done—arming the guard—not only without my knowledge but against my direct orders."

"But as Chief of Staff of the Columbian Army—" Mack began.

"As Chief of Staff of the Columbian Army I am—or was—a figure-head, Mr. Fraser," said the black marshal with a sardonic half-smile. "Do you think for a moment that the tight little group that runs this Republic is going to give a nigger like me any real authority?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Elspeth, feeling a rush of sympathy for the marshal. "But in a way I think I'm glad. It means you are on Reed Weston's side really."

"Reed Weston and I have been good friends for a very long time," said the Negro marshal, his anger fading before the affection he felt. "I have done all I could to support his ideas—as much as my oath to the Republic permitted me. But, Miss Marriner, until the accident of your seeing the disintegrator in use yesterday gave me proof that the Republic had violated its oath to me, my help has been extremely limited."

"Marshal Henry," Mack inquired sharply, "if you were on Reed Weston's side all the time, why didn't you help us escape from Bienville House yesterday morning?"

Marshal Henry looked sadly at the photographer, then shook his head and sighed. "If there was anything more I could have done for you, please name it, Mr. Fraser. I could have had you arrested and disarmed without danger to myself at any instant between my rooms and the garage. Incidentally, seeing your car suddenly take to the air over the heads of those guards"—he shook his head again—"was one of the happiest moments of my life."

"I'm sorry," said Mack, for once apparently contrite. "And thanks for being so patient with me. We ran afoul of an Imperial agent named

van Hooten in New Orleans or we'd have been here ourselves some time yesterday evening."

"Van Hooten—Everard van Hooten?" Marshal Henry asked. At Mack and Elspeth's nods his eyebrows shot upward. "An Imperialist spy? I've heard of that young Northerner as a cotillion leader—for all I know I may have seen him here and there—but how could anyone give such a fop credit for being anything else?"

"Elly—Miss Marriner—spotted him first," Mack said charitably. "It turned out that he had a purple bee tattooed behind one ear. That was the giveaway."

"Thank you again, Miss Marriner, for information which may prove to be of vital importance in the struggle ahead of us," the tall soldier said, bowing gently to Elspeth.

"It was—it was just luck both times," said the girl, feeling her face grow embarrassingly hot. "I've fouled up a lot more things. Ask Mack—Mr. Fraser. He knows." As usual, when embarrassed and unable to flee, she took refuge in the world of her reverie. She studied Marshal Henry, the marvelous arrangement of the planes of his face, the vast strength of body beneath the simple gray field tunic, the ebon gloss of skin, the white hair, the perfect ball of his head.

There had been other great black soldiers, of course. Some of the Carthaginians, the Mameluke leaders, Alexandre Dumas's father, Toussaint—all had risen high despite the prejudice of living in a white world, yet none had achieved the supreme honors or position that his talents, valor and devotion merited.

Elspeth let herself consider an ode to such men, to such a man—perhaps to Marshal Henry himself when she knew more about him. It would have to be very deep, very subtle if it were not to emerge maudlin maple syrup. But perhaps if she were to . . .

"Miss Marriner." Marshal Henry's voice, usually so softly modulated, revealed its training to command. Elspeth emerged from her reverie with a start and murmured something inconsequential about having let her attention wander.

The black marshal forgave her with a kindly smile, said, "Before you meet Reed Weston I want to tell you something about him—sketch in a bit of his background. Otherwise you might fail utterly to understand him, which must not happen. I believe you are both new to Columbia and are therefore unacquainted with many of its problems and people and states of mind."

"I'm very much afraid that is true." said Elspeth apologetically. "Yes, we *are* very green."

"But potentially very valuable," the marshal informed them. He had lighted a long thin black cigar and was smoking it while seated upon a corner of his big desk. His was, Elspeth thought, a personality both intensely likable and immensely impressive—a most unusual combination to find in one person. Character and compassion seemed to come through his very pores, yet she could sense an innate hard core of toughness that gave her no doubt as to the fact that here was a born soldier, a born leader of men.

He went on to say. "You must first understand that Reed Weston is the son of a swag-grabber. These swag-grabbers were avaricious and generally unscrupulous men who invaded the northeastern states after what we call our Civil War—they prefer to think of it as the Second Revolution—during the inevitable period of demoralization that followed the Elmira surrender."

"These swag-grabbers bought or stole land, votes, money—everything they could lay their hands on. As a rule, since they controlled the state legislatures during the period, they managed to make their thefts legal simply by altering the laws to suit. It is the memory of the swag-grabber and his misdeeds that causes the Northeast still to feel resentment against the rest of the nation. Frankly, I know no one today who blames them for feeling so.

"It so happens that Reed Weston's father ferreted out a brilliant young New York inventor named Edison—Thomas Edison, I believe—and forced him to sell all his patents for a song. Later they proved of incredible value—our electric lighting, our basic rocket-power patents, our metal alloys, for instance, are still dependent in large degree upon those 'stolen' patents.

"Young Edison, utterly embittered, shot himself not long after his patents were force-purchased. Harlan Weston—Reed Weston's father—became immensely rich out of them. Thus Reed Weston was born into one of the greatest fortunes Columbia or any other country has ever known. He is still incredibly wealthy in spite of the fact that he is today virtually an outlaw. His patent royalties still roll in from all over the world.

"However, Reed Weston"—Marshal Henry paused long enough to flick a three-inch ash from his cigar into a hole with a metal rim set in the corner of the desk itself—"Reed Weston has suffered all his

life from a sense of guilt. It derives, I suppose, from the way in which his father obtained his great wealth. He has always felt a burning desire to make sure that such injustices can never happen again."

"I understand perfectly," said Elspeth when the marshal paused again. Mack, who was frowning in deep concentration, merely uttered a grunt of agreement.

"Good. I have tried to be clear about it," said the Negro marshal. "Now Reed Weston, perhaps as a result of this sense of guilt for his father's sins, is at times a most impatient man. He is capable of being badly hurt by what he considers the failure of some of those about him to live up to his ideals.

"For instance, he was terribly hurt when the Wilkinson government refused to accept in toto the national reforms he knew were needed. He was disturbed again this morning when I got here and told him of the violation of civilized law on the part of the government by use of the disintegrator."

"Any man who wants to make changes in the world has got to be tough—perhaps tougher than the rest of us," said Mack in his rather flat normal tone.

"Reed Weston is tough—make no mistake about that," replied the black marshal. "But he is a man unavoidably driven by his inner compulsions. And he is also a great scientist—probably the greatest in the world today. As a very small boy he made up his mind to dedicate his life to justifying his father's thieveries by living up to the Edison tradition."

"If he's responsible for that space ship we got a look at when we were flying in just now he really is a wonder," Mack remarked, lighting himself a cigarette.

"Hey, me too," cried Elspeth, but it was Marshal Henry who gave her a cigarette and then lit it for her. Mack, as usual, appeared to be utterly unabashed. His lack of courtesy, Elspeth decided ruefully, amounted almost to an elemental force.

"Your flying over the Mars was reported to me," said Marshal Henry with a flicker of concern. "As a matter of fact, that's why I sent out a patrol to bring you here. We were highly concerned about what might have happened to you after we lost your trail in New Orleans yesterday. Naturally we wanted to make sure it was you in that amazing flier of yours. Now—well, your recognition of the Mars for what it is makes you more important than ever to us."



"Marshal Henry," said Mack, "I'd like to ask you some questions—may I?" The marshal nodded, flicking another ash from his cigar into the desk hole. Mack, frowning, went on with, "There's one thing here I don't understand. If you have all this rocket power and even space ships, how is it you don't have airplanes?"

"Airplanes?" Marshal Henry looked his puzzlement from one to the other of them.

"Heavier-than-air compression-powered flying machines," Mack explained. "The Pipit, our little job, is a convertible dual-purpose automobile-airplane. It looks silly alongside the Mars. You have these disintegrators, a whole flock of amazing rocket machines and weapons—but no planes. Why not?"

Marshal Henry rose from the desk and walked the carpet with long-legged strides, casting an occasional thoughtful glance at the photographer and the girl. Finally he put out his cigar, lit a fresh one and resumed his seat on the desk corner. He said, "To ask that you must come from very far away indeed."

"We do," said Elspeth. "I thought you knew about that. But it doesn't answer Mack's question." Instantly she felt fright at her temerity in speaking so aggressively, but the Negro marshal only smiled faintly.

"I know very little about you—except that Reed vouches for you," he told them. "As for—Mack's question, I think that perhaps I may know the answer. Some of the factors are sociological, some economic, some military, I suppose. But it is my belief that the basic cause is our failure to develop a sufficiently light and powerful engine to drive the sort of craft you mean. We have for a long time obtained tremendous power and tremendous speeds, but only from the heaviest sort of rocket drives

"Perhaps we got our power and great speed for trains and trucks and ships too fast—too soon. Our ships can average fifty knots, the best of them. Our trains are twice as fast. We have never had need of any other sort of power, I suppose. That is why your flying machine—the Pipit, is it?—comes as such a thundering surprise to us here. Why, when I saw it sprout wings and fly . . ."

His voice faded off and he shook his head slowly. Mack put his cigarette butt down a metal-lined hole in the arm of his chair. He said, "Marshal, do you mean to say you don't have an internal-combustion engine here?"

"'Internal combust——'" The phrase was obviously new to him. But then his face cleared and he said, "I think I know what you mean. I believe Reed Weston has done some work on such a motor—but without much success to date. It required too much shielding for the results obtained."

"When do we meet Reed Weston?" Mack asked bluntly.

The black marshal glanced quickly at a clock set in the wall behind the desk. He said, "Reed Weston should be here in exactly three minutes." He paused, added, "I presume you are both curious as to why you are here—your real purpose." His voice grew grim. "I believe you have been sent here to prevent Reed Weston from leaving this planet forever."

"Good God!" Mack exploded, coming up out of his chair. "You mean he's about to leave Earth? But in that case, where is he going? The other planets——"

"Mars is completely habitable for humans," said the black marshal. "Reed actually visited the Red Planet last year in a small space rocket and found conditions generally satisfactory."

"How did he get back here?" Elspeth found that she, too, was on her feet, vitally interested in the strange and unexpected turn of the conversation. "I mean, if you—if no one here has any planes, how did he land?"

"He didn't—on Mars," said the marshal. "He and his crew circled the planet twice and were able to take atmosphere samples, spectroscopic, photographic, and other readings of the surface. They landed back here by parachute. Reed broke his leg."

"My God!" exclaimed Mack. "So now he's going back there to stay, in that monster rocket we saw from the Pipit?"

"He's taking the sixty best brains and bodies of Earth along with him this time," said Marshal Henry quietly. "I feel honored that there is a place for me aboard. But thus far I have refused to go. I feel that my place is right here, where I am needed more. So is Reed's."

"Apple juice!" said a new voice rudely. A stocky and dynamic little man with an immense bulldog head, flaming red hair, and stoic stride, voice, and motions moved swiftly into the center of the big room as a door shut softly in back of him. "You'll be needed a lot more on Mars, John," he added definitively.

"John Henry"—the name rang bells in Elspeth's memory. She had, of course, read the old legends of the great John Henry, the mighty,

black riverman of her own world. And here, in this alien orb, John Henry was a latter-day reality.

A new sense of his magnificence swept over her. The marshal was cast in the rare mold of heroes—physically, mentally, spiritually. He was refusing an honored place in the greatest adventure man had yet undertaken—refusing in order to face the petty hatreds of small men who could never forgive the color of his skin, men who might well try him for treason. And his reason was that he knew there were other men who needed him, men he might help.

To Elspeth he towered over Reed Weston, and his size was no mere matter of bodily height and breadth and girth of chest. Here, she thought, was a man who was close to God. She superimposed upon his reality a mental image of the legendary John Henry of her own world, watched through half-closed eyes as the two images melted into single clear focus.

She realized then that Reed Weston was talking angrily to both John Henry and Mack, flapping his short arms as he spoke.

"... and now you tell me that the corrupt and criminal fools have put disintegrators into the hands of their own *condottieri* with orders to employ them at will. I ask you, why should I or any man of reasoning intelligence want to remain on such a world? What better chance is left than that of creating a new and better world on a planet where such idiot killers do not exist?"

Elspeth found herself again on her feet. Within her was the memory of the sad wisdom of Mr. Horelle, of all that Mack and she had endured on this mission, of Marshal John Henry, of the evil Everard, of the long motorized columns of soldiers and their counterparts south of the Border, moving north toward inevitable deadly collision. It had to come out of her, and it did.

"We offer you the need of hundreds of millions who want only a chance to follow the ways of peace and progress," she said. She knew she was shouting and didn't care. "We offer you the job you seek to flee from, even though in your heart and the hearts of those who would flee with you, you know self-forgiveness cannot lurk.

"You can never flee from yourselves; you can never forget the ruin of those left at the mercy of men like President Wilkinson and a hungry empire by your desertion. We offer you a new chance to find peace with yourselves upon a world that needs you too sorely to let you go."

Reed Weston, who had been studying her while she talked as if she were some strange and rather unpleasant new animal, blinked rapidly and shook his red head. His voice, when he found it, was heavy with irony.

"And just how, Miss Marriner, are you proposing to show me a way of putting this mad world at peace?" he countered. "Against disintegrators our weapons are worthless. Nothing we know of can remain organically existent within a thousand yards of them. And we have nothing to prevent them from coming within a thousand yards of us."

"I have seen the weapon these young people have brought us," said Marshal Henry quietly. Mack's eyes lit with sudden hope.

"We've got what will fill the hole in your inventory," he said with conviction. "You must have some idea of who sent us and why we are here."

"I do," said Reed Weston and for once uncertainty was present in his voice and manner. "I was—informed of your journey and its purpose." He paused, lowered his head, then lifted it to reveal his broad lumpy brow. "Otherwise would I be listening to you at all in a moment like this? But you have come here too late—forty-eight hours too late. The use of the disintegrator, which you yourself saw, Miss Marriner, should convince you of that."

"Just what is the disintegrator—and how does it work?" Mack inquired.

"It is the projector of a beam of intense heat," said Reed Weston patiently. "We have nothing to stand against it. It will eliminate a human being almost instantaneously at close range. At longer ranges—up to a thousand yards—it may take a second to work fully. But in that time a man is long dead. And it will disintegrate tougher organic substances in only a little longer time."

"I should think it would melt the barrel that fires it," said Mack thoughtfully.

"The compound that composes and charges it does not take effect until its basic charge reaches the muzzle of the weapon itself. That is the reason for its odd design. It is a molecular process, much too involved for explanation now. And it is a combination of very simple elements—so that it is an easy weapon to manufacture once the secret is known. Too easy! No, Mr. Fraser, you have come here too late."

"I still think we brought you a way to victory—if you will only use it," said the photographer stubbornly.

"We have already won our victory—over space," the inventor replied. "We have our way out of this horror. The most brilliant scientific and philosophical brains of Earth have already agreed with me that it is the *only* way out."

"You won't be alone on Mars long," said Elspeth. "We flew over your space ship coming here today. We saw quarters for hundreds—perhaps thousands—of men around it. We saw hundreds of men working on the Mars itself." She paused to clear her throat.

"When you and your fine-feathered friends take off for a new planet and leave these men behind to face the wrath of a government planning to convict them of treason, do you really believe they won't build another ship—either for their own escape or for their new masters? Do you really think so, Reed Weston, mighty intellect that I am informed you are? If so you are a fool."

She felt a certain detached amazement at the sound of her own voice. But there were still words to say, phrases to make, ideas to express. Assembling her thoughts, she went on.

"Do you think, Reed Weston, that you will be regarded as an object of faith or honor by the men and women you have deserted in their hour of greatest need? Do you think that, Reed Weston?"

"It is a difficult question—a most difficult decision," said Weston. Then, more firmly, "We have decided that it is better to begin anew, on a new planet where men and women of good will can be free to work and live and think and breathe and love rather than be tainted by the general corruption of this world."

"And how *should* men and women work and live and think and breathe and love?" Elspeth countered. "As they can, as they must, as they *do*—or by some theory conceived in comfort and security, a theory suitable perhaps to a few selected souls? Do you think your children, if you have any, will fit neatly into a pigeonholed set of shelves? Nonsense! They'll be acquisitive little pioneers, out for all they can get. They'll have to be—if they wish to survive on a new planet.

"Furthermore, the world will follow you—*must* follow you. Agreed, at least some of the men who worked on the Mars will know enough to build another ship without your guidance. Even if not, other men will find the way. You will find, ultimately, that there is no escape from Earth, even in space. Your scheme of a tight little hygienic heaven is a myth. *Face it!*"

"Bravo!" cried a new feminine voice from somewhere to one side of the room. "That was terrific, Elspeth!"

Startled, Elspeth looked around for its source. A small very lovely young woman stood just inside the door, carrying a sealed message in one hand. She was modestly—even demurely—dressed in dark skirt and crisp white blouse, her deep-red hair drawn back neatly in an inconspicuous roll at the nape of her neck.

But no demureness of costume could hide the curves of her figure; no plainness of hairdo conceal the soft enchantment of her features. Had Elspeth needed more for recognition, the gleam that lit in Mack's eyes at sight of her would have been enough.

"Juana!" Elspeth said, honestly surprised and actually glad to see someone she knew, "Where on earth did you come from?"

## CHAPTER NINE

MACK, OF COURSE, was overboard and sunk without trace. Elspeth needed but one quick sidelong glance to see that he was vibrating almost visibly to Juana's unexpected presence. Also that the girl, while overtly ignoring the photographer, was doing considerable vibrating of her own. Once again Elspeth was snapped back into the present focus by Reed Weston.

"Words—mere words!" the rebel exclaimed, regarding her with a cold sardonic expression. "Perhaps you and your friend here do have a gadget which makes earth-flight no problem. But what good is a mere gadget, no matter how novel or effective, against the creeping dry rot of intrenched hoggishness that has closed *this* world to honor and is now doing all in its power to sterilize it against ideas or any form of creative thought?"

Elspeth again glanced covertly at Mack, but saw that she could scarcely expect help from him at that moment. She was pierced by a bitter shaft of resentment, not only at Mack and Juana but at Mr. Horelle, who must have been responsible for the presence of the lush little auburn-head in Norman at this extremely crucial moment.

"At least," she told Reed Weston after briefly rallying her forces for a solo endeavor, "I think you ought to take a look at the Pipit—the 'gadget' as you call it—before you give up on its possibilities of use in this world. We have come a long way and our journey has been both difficult and perilous."

"I'm sorry, Miss Marriner, I didn't mean to be rude," said Weston, and for the first time since his entrance into the room he smiled. It was a quick, nervous lip smile, but it served to reveal to Elspeth some fraction of the magnetic charm that had helped to make him a vital leader in this alien world.

"Unfortunately," he went on more calmly, "we are laboring under a sword of Damocles whose already thin thread has frayed until it now hangs by but a single strand. Furthermore, time is running out on us. Already the Columbian Army is advancing upon the Mexican Border from Brownsville to Ventura—and already the Imperial forces are advancing upon it from the south. War may break out anywhere at any moment."

He paced the carpet jerkily, then swung to face her and continued his monologue. "Once war *does* break out — as it now must — our brief

period of grace will be automatically over. Columbia, in spite of the corruption of its leaders, is none the less a mighty world power. It has other armies already moving to encircle our few strongholds here in the freedom area."

Weston paused briefly to light a cigarette, went on with, "Columbia agents as well as Empire spies have been planting their subversive seeds for months among our people—and both of them can tap treasury funds we cannot hope to match. No, Miss Marriner, we must leave this nation, this Earth, at the first possible moment!"

"But, Mr. Weston"—to Elspeth's surprise it was Juana speaking in her liquid accents — "I do think, if only as a favor to me, that you should at least look at this machine Mr. Fraser and Miss Marriner have brought you."

"You really do, Juana?" Reed Weston's expression softened as he looked at his secretary. Then he shook his head at her and added in tones of mock reproof, "You know, my dear, you are something of a mystery to me. Every instinct I possess but one tells me I ought not to listen to you. Remember, I know very little about you despite your vouching." Then he sighed and concluded with, "But if you say so I'll do it."

Elspeth found herself rejoicing unashamedly in the inner lift she received from the jealous resentment that flamed high and quickly beneath the scar tissue on Mack Fraser's upper lids. But Marshal Henry, who had remained quietly in the background during most of the argument, stepped forward once more.

"Reed, I can vouch for this machine of theirs," he said with his quiet, irresistible force. "Remember, I saw it in operation only yesterday morning."

"Was it only yesterday?" inquired Elspeth with rhetorical irrelevancy. "Why, it seems ages!"

Reed Weston regarded her blankly, then said, "Very well, let's take a look at it now." He led the way from the office with Marshal Henry and Elspeth close on his heels and Juana and the bemused photographer bringing up the rear.

The Pipit, looking demurely and innocently earthbound, sat in lonely isolation at the far end of a sparsely populated gravel parking lot, its windshield twinkling a greeting at them in the sunlight. Reed Weston, his hands clasped behind his back, marched twice around it, surveying



it with the dubious interest of a man who finds a meteor reposing on his front lawn.

Finally he came back to the others and, following an unbelieving look over his shoulder, said, "Do you mean to tell me that this—this whatever-it-is—flies?"

"Oh quite—certainly," said Elspeth. She punched Mack and gave him a none-too-gentle shove in the direction of the driver's seat. He skidded a step, regarded her with resentment, then drew himself up with dignity and climbed in behind the wheel. Elspeth sighed her relief, turned to find Marshal Henry looking down at her thoughtfully.

"I believe I'd like to try it too," he said. Then Juana, to Elspeth's slight annoyance, said likewise, and both of them climbed in after Mack, leaving her alone on the gravel with the scowling Reed Weston.

He was still studying the Pipit, muttering to himself and shaking his red head. Finally he looked hard at Elspeth and said, "I don't believe it, you know. It's impossible. The combined . . ."

Just then Mack started the motor, and the rebel leader stopped talking to run quickly to the Pipit. He lifted the hood and regarded the engine in motion for a long moment. Then he dropped the hood back, reset the clamps, stepped aside and motioned for Mack to go ahead.

Mack ran it for a hundred feet on the gravel to pick up speed, then let out the wings and took off sharply from the ground. Reed Weston followed him, his frown gone, his eyes popping, his mouth half open in sheer surprise, as Mack put the little vehicle through its air paces.

Elspeth was far from awe-struck. On the contrary, she was angry, "The crazy damn fool!" she muttered, thereby drawing an annoyed glance from the rebel leader. She knew what Mack was doing—he was showing off. Not for the benefit of Reed Weston and Marshal Henry but for Juana. She hoped he wouldn't crack up and wreck the demonstration after all they had gone through to arrange it.

She should have known better where Mack and machines were concerned. After a five-minute flight the photographer brought the little war-plane easily to earth, retracted its wings and pulled to an easy stop directly in front of Reed Weston. At once the rebel leader was wrenching at the near door handle, urging the others to make room for him inside.

This time Elspeth watched the demonstration with Marshal Henry at her side. The huge Negro looked slightly gray beneath his ebony

skin. He sucked in his breath and shook his head as the Pipit took off once more.

"It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen," he murmured, as much to himself as to Elspeth. "Think of it, an automobile that can fly—and that can be handled so easily!" Then, focusing his attention directly upon Elspeth, "Miss Marriner, I think that you have saved a hemisphere—perhaps a world. Tell me, what fuel does this Pipit of yours use?"

She told him that it flew on ordinary kerosene, just like most of the non-ammonia-using vehicles in this strange Columbian world. He listened to her attentively but kept one eye on the Pipit while Mack was running it through its paces. He was palpably relieved when the photographer brought Reed Weston safely back to earth.

"What do you think of her, Reed?" the black marshal asked of his chief as the latter emerged reluctantly from the sturdy little vehicle.

"Think?" cried the redheaded rebel leader. His face was aglow and his teeth gleamed suddenly in a grin that threatened literally to split his cheeks. "*Think!*" he shouted. "Why, with this wonderful craft in production we have Columbia, the Empire, the World itself in our hands! Miss Marriner, I can only apologize humbly for my doubts." He bowed briefly over her hand. "Rest assured I am now a fervent believer."

Mack clambered out then and assisted Juana from the Pipit as though she were composed of the same components as an old-fashioned lace valentine. This, Elspeth thought uncharitably, although the dark redhead moved with the lithe assured strength and poise of a ballet dancer—or perhaps a female hockey player.

But Mack had little more time with Juana that day. Reed Weston was at him from then on, questioning, hypothesizing, chivvyng, bullying—Weston and a small corps of engineers and experts hastily assembled from sundry other projects. The photographer had to call on all his knowledge of and instinct for machinery to explain to these specialists the principles and materials upon which the Pipit was built and functioned.

To her considerable surprise, Elspeth found herself lunching in a pleasantly functional woman's commissary with the glamorous Juana. Even more surprising and annoying was the fact that she found herself unable to help liking the girl, who gave her some sorely needed

and low-voiced briefing upon various facets of being an interworld agent.

"Perhaps," Juana told Elspeth bluntly over an excellent charlotte russe, "we aren't always discreet about romance. But we're like sailors or traveling salesmen—we have so little time for it anywhere that we have to grab what we can. Maybe I shouldn't have let Mack lead me down the garden path, or vice versa"—she dimpled with all the irresistible charm of a knowingly mischievous child—"if it hadn't been plain to see that you two were so poorly suited to one another."

"Just a moment!" cried Elspeth, making a desperate grab for both her breath and her wits. "When you say 'we' I take it that you're putting me on the same team with yourself—and with Mack also in the line-up."

"But of course," said Juana, looking honestly surprised. "Take it from me, there is no road back once you're in it—even if you wanted to go back, which I simply can't believe. Mr. Horelle wouldn't have sent you here unless you were with us. After all, it *is* the most important and exciting and honorable work in all the worlds. No, Mr. Horelle would not have summoned you unless he were sure."

It was on the tip of Elspeth's tongue to say that Mr. Horelle had not "summoned" either Mack or herself. However, she thought better of the comment before it left her lips. After all, she still had nothing but the vaguest of ideas as to what forces had been at work—were still at work—where she and Mack—yes, and Juana—were concerned.

So instead, she remarked, "And just how long have you been doing this—this sort of interworld hopping, Juana? You look awfully young to be a veteran."

"You learn fast in this field—or else," the other replied. "Of course I'm older than I look—even if I'm not as old as you."

"Ouch!" said Elspeth, wincing. "I suppose I asked for that."

"Why, did I say something wrong?" Juana inquired naively. Then, while Elspeth was counting slowly to ten, "I don't come from this world, of course—or the world you and Mack come from. Mine's in a bit of a mess just now. I guess I got into this business through Tod. He was my fiancé."

"*Was?*" the poetess inquired. She found it difficult to associate tragedy of any sort with a person as young, as vibrantly alive, as comely as Juana. But Juana nodded matter-of-factly.

"Yes, Tod was called for this sort of work right after he graduated

from college. We were going to be married that autumn, but—well, he wasn't lucky. Or perhaps he didn't learn fast enough. I was determined to find out what had happened to him and bring whoever was responsible to justice. Oh, I was all ready to call in the cops, the G-men, the T-men—everything."

"Yes?" said Elspeth, faintly puzzled but intrigued.

"Well, I guess Mr. Horelle was afraid I might upset the ever-loving balance—you know, 'never underestimate the power of a woman' sort of thing—so he had me brought to Spindrift Key and explained what had happened to Tod and what the work was. He had a letter to me from Tod, a letter asking me to carry on for him if I didn't want to settle down with some other man in my own world."

"Your Tod must have been quite a fellow," said Elspeth sympathetically. Juana nodded and unexpectedly her eyes filled.

"That he was," she said. "So much so that I've never found another man I wanted to marry on any of the worlds I've visited." She laughed mirthlessly and tossed back her long mahogany hair. "But I have my share of fun, and I really feel as if I'm doing something. It isn't a chance many girls get—or many men either."

"You're quite a girl yourself, Juana," said Elspeth and found herself meaning it.

"But I'm not, really," the other replied earnestly. "I just run errands and fill in at small jobs like being Reed Weston's secretary and entertain visiting firemen. It's all right, but I have no real gifts—like yours for poetry."

Elspeth thought that Juana had a good many more gifts than she realized but forbore saying so. Instead she had coffee with the other-world girl and then went back with her to Weston's office, where Marshal Henry was temporarily working. He smiled up at them from behind a small stack of papers atop the big desk as Juana ushered her in and closed the door behind her.

"Miss Marriner," he said, rising and motioning her to a chair, "you and I seem to be deputed to do some negotiating. Reed has left the matter in my hands, and your—er—Mr. Fraser is going to be very busy this afternoon. He informed me at lunch that you were fully qualified for the task. Before we begin, however, I must repeat what you already probably know—that time is of the proverbial essence."

Had the huge black marshal not used the word "proverbial" to soften his cliché Elspeth might not again have noticed him as a person.

Until he spoke she had been utterly wrapped up in and befuddled by her absorption in her emotional life and the strange new existence that had opened up for her since she and Mack had been given the routine Hatteras Keys assignment by Orrin Lewis less than a week before.

But because she was word conscious she looked at him then, saw him not as a living legend but as a man—a great man of strength and wisdom and gentleness who had surmounted vast obstacles put unfairly in his path, a man capable of sacrificing his personal welfare for an ideal. She smiled back at him, then frowned as she sought the thread of his words.

"But, Marshal Henry, we have nothing to negotiate. We came here on assignment to turn the Pipit over to Reed Weston."

He rose again, towering over her, and scowled as he ran a big hand through his white hair. "I don't mean to be dense," he told her, "but I don't understand at all. You and Mr. Fraser have come here at considerable trouble and risk. You have brought with you a device that is little short of a miracle—a device that may enable us to fulfill all our ideals as well as bring peace to Columbia. You have brought with you the knowledge to teach us how to manufacture this device ourselves. Yet you say there is nothing to negotiate, Miss Marriner."

His voice grew deeper, rougher, bringing her out of the near-hypnotic reverie that had overcome her. It was, she thought, the Afro-American music of his voice, the rhythmically controlled power of his every move, the . . .

She had begun instinctively to put her thoughts into poetic phrase, to seek the liquid meter that would fit the marshal, that would catch the essence of this ebony demigod, would capture his very being in words, as a fly is caught in amber. But the phrase, the meter she sought, were still stubbornly elusive when the marshal's use of her name woke her up.

"Are you ill?" he inquired solicitously, reaching for the carafe at his elbow. "Shall I send out for a drink—or a doctor?"

"No—no, thanks," she said, a trifle faintly. "I'm—all right. I'm afraid I have a bad habit of wandering when what passes for my mind gets to working. You see, Marshal, I'm a poet."

"Which is all very interesting," he told her with a trace of irony that was somehow not unsympathetic, "but fails to get us much further with our negotiations. Surely you must expect something. After all, you may have saved us from certain defeat."

"I'm sorry," she said and knew the warmth rising within her was dangerous. "We were sent here to deliver the Pipit and await further orders. We were not told to demand payment."

"You *are* an unworldly person, Miss Marriner," he said, regarding her as if he half expected her to vanish. Then, with sincerity that brooked no suspicion, "But I think I like you very much. I think I even trust you." His eyes became grave and he added, "I wish I could fully share Reed's assurance that the Pipit will win us the peace we want." He sighed, looked at his hands.

"He is either riding the crest or deep in the trough," the black marshal went on slowly. "You saw him before and after he rode in the Pipit. Before, he wanted to flee Earth, after, he was sure he had all the reins in his hands."

"Why do you doubt his assurance?" Elspeth asked.

"Because, while I know the Pipit offers a solution to many of our problems, it does not solve them all. I fear, unless we find some way to check or find a shield for the disintegrator, the best we can expect is a costly stalemate. We are not dealing entirely with fools, Miss Marriner."

"What will you do if you can't find a way of stopping the disintegrator?" Elspeth asked. Marshal Henry opened his hands.

"The only thing we can do—run a colossal bluff," he told her. Then he smiled and said, "But I would rather discuss a more personal possibility."

Elspeth agreed, some moments later, to have dinner with Marshal Henry that evening. It was already dark when one of Reed Weston's huge staff rocket cars braked to a halt in front of the women's quarters to pick her up. The poet, who was awaiting the marshal in a dither composed of equal portions of excitement, newly roused emotions, and a clinging sense of faithlessness to Mack, emerged promptly and moved to enter the rear of the vehicle.

"In front, please," said the chauffeur, opening the door. She got in and they roared off in a flare of jets, away from the cantonment. Puzzled and concerned, Elspeth said, "But where is Marshal Henry? I thought we were to—"

"Here he is," said the driver, laughing and tossing back a sort of parka he was wearing to reveal the ebony visage of the former Columbian chief of staff. "I didn't want a lot of bodyguards following me around, so I arranged this little surprise." He chuckled like a boy

who has just successfully planted a tack in the principal's chair. "They'll be out of their minds until we get back," he added.

Elsbeth found her first trip in a rocket car much like a jaunt on a Percheron after being accustomed to Shetland ponies. The big vehicle bucked and blasted—yet held the road with astonishing firmness under the marshal's skilled guidance. They drove some forty miles south to a fine secluded rural restaurant he knew, and on the way they passed the gracefully towering silver spire of the Mars, gleaming like a gargantuan needle in the early moonlight.

Over the meal Elspeth said thoughtfully, "Seeing the Mars almost makes me wish we had not broken in here today to alter Reed Weston's plans—his dream of space—"

"His dream was already shattered or he would never for a moment have conceived such a plan with conditions what they are," the marshal told her firmly. "Your arrival here was the machination of Fate if ever I saw it machinate."

"I'm not joking," she said, but for all that she smiled. He had such an appealing boyishness for all his greatness and importance. Then she added, "You must have had some inkling of who we were—of our coming at any rate—when you spoke to us in the hotel lift in Baton Rouge. And of course when you helped us to escape and when you smiled at us on the balcony in New Orleans."

He looked at her for a long moment with an intensity that almost frightened her. But when he spoke his voice was low, almost a whisper, as he said, "If you'll forgive a supposedly responsible citizen for being a damned fool—I'm afraid it was you."

"Oh my dear!" she exclaimed and all reason was washed away in the emotion that flooded her. "Oh my dear!"

She was still walking in a rosy glow that defied the night shadows when at last they left the inn and re-entered the huge rocket car for the drive back to camp. The moon was already low in the sky as Marshal John cut in the twin motors, and Elspeth found herself fascinated by the long shadows the trees scattered about the innyard cast on the grass that surrounded them.

One, she saw, had a double shadow. It amused her to speculate upon what set of natural conditions could have caused it. And then she saw the shadow move, just as her companion cut in his sodium headlamps. She peered at the tree as they went roaring past it and, in the glow of

the lamps, caught just a glimpse of an outlined profile, a remembered profile.

"John," she said. "You remember that spy—the one we had trouble with—Everard van Hooten? He's back behind that tree. He must have been watching us."

The marshal uttered a magnificent curse but drove on. Then he said, "Look back as long as you can—for any sort of signal. If they were going to trap us at the inn they already would have."

Elsbeth swiveled around in the seat and peered over the back of the open-topped rocket car. Seconds later she saw it—the golden stem and green flower of a rocket. She informed the marshal, who said, "Now keep your eyes open ahead."

Again in a matter of seconds a rocket flared—this time a red one. "I see it," said the marshal. "Looks as if they've got us boxed. I'll never forgive myself for getting you into this."

There was no sense in cutting the lights, with the jet flare to betray them in the darkness. The marshal handed her a weapon and gave her brief instructions on how to use it. It was an air-needle gun, good, he told her, up to a hundred yards. Elspeth saw that it was much like the weapon Everard had carried the evening before and had recovered from Mack's pocket.

They had gone less than a mile when the road block loomed up in their lamps. The marshal did not slacken speed—rather, he increased it. "Going to try to crash through. Hold on," he told Elspeth. She crouched low in the seat, wondering if, after all, the whole incredible experience were a dream.

The jar of their collision informed her otherwise. She was rocked and bumped and finally tossed clear of car and road to land with a jarring thump high up on the side of a bank. To her amazement the gun was still in her hand.

Marshal Henry, standing in full light in the middle of the road, was a magnificent if somewhat ragged figure. Blood was flowing from a cut in his scalp, and three men, looking like ugly little gnomes, were crowding around him.

"Who was with you? . . . Where'd he go? . . . Better talk quick." The questions poured thick and fast until one of the gnomes spotted Elspeth as she got to her feet and yelled. Then he turned to run for her, waving his gun.

She tried to work her own weapon, but her aim was poor and before



she knew it the man was pulling her down into the road. He smelled of garlic and the rough surface of his jacket scraped her face. She heard him yell, "Hey, guys. it's a girl, no less!"

She screamed and then a whole sudden spate of new sounds broke out around her. She did not lose consciousness but her awareness was fading when her captor was pulled roughly from her and she found that she could again see.

Two of the pygmies lay crumpled in the road, their skulls smashed like pumpkins, blood and brains staining the asphalt of their pillows. One of them was still stirring feebly and his eyes glowed like dying fireflies in the hideous yellow sodium torchlight that illuminated the scene.

Then she heard her recent captor scream like a horse with a broken leg. Horrified but unable to tear her eyes away, she watched the marshal, now more torn of uniform and bleeding from fresh cuts on his face and neck, pick up his enemy in both hands as if he were a fox furpiece, shake him violently to stop his screaming, then break his back across one knee and toss him carelessly away.

"Don't be afraid, darling," the marshal said, coming to help her up. "Most of this blood isn't mine. Let's see if these dogs have a car here that will get us back to camp."

That was the last thing Elspeth remembered about that night.

## CHAPTER TEN

**B**EGINNING LATE the following morning, events began to move more swiftly in Columbia, and Reed Weston's Norman headquarters was the focal point of activity. There were increasingly rapid exchanges of messages and messengers, not only with Weston's other headquarters but with Columbian and Imperial leaders. From a time of increasing gloom and forced patriotism it had become a time of mounting excitement.

Elsbeth, who found herself up and about some thirty hours after her shattering experience with the marshal, saw little of Mack in the days that followed. The photographer seemed to be incessantly tied up either with the technicians or with Juana, who continued to play a silent but omnipresent role in the background. Elspeth was present, however, by request of Marshal Henry, at meetings with both Columbian and Mexican plenipotentiaries, who wished to know something of the qualities and uses of the Pipit.

It was the black marshal himself, still slightly patched, who took over both meetings when the officials had finished questioning her. "Miss Marriner," he told both groups, "has given you an idea of the Pipit's uses as a means of peaceful transport. You will shortly see a demonstration of its potentialities for war.

"Our engineers, already engaged in preparing its manufacture on a vast scale—vaster than anything yet attempted in the world—will give you estimates to prove that this flying marvel can be made at a price far lower than that of any existing locomotion.

"It is, however, my especial job to make plain to all of you that the Pipit's war uses are potentially even greater. Armed with rocket weapons, it can swoop down upon any desired point from above and without warning. It can land and evacuate an army or merely destroy and escape unharmed. I know that you gentlemen today are in possession of no weapons to stop it.

"Orders have already been issued," he concluded grimly, "to send the Pipit so armed to destroy immediately and utterly the headquarters and headquarters personnel of either Columbian or Imperialistic forces which again employ the illegal disintegrator. And rest assured, gentlemen, we have agents able quickly to inform us of the use of that weapon on any scale. Now, sirs, if you will be so good as to follow me . . ."

When he had finished with the last of them and they had departed for their bases, a quiet, thoughtful, and shaken group of men, Marshal Henry turned to Elspeth with a sudden and softening smile and said, "Did I preach them too much of a sermon, Elly? Do you think I put it over?"

"You done wonnerful—jus' wonnerful, Johnny," she told him. Then, seriously, "You were grand. Now what do we do?"

"From now on we sit and wait—and keep on learning how to manufacture Pipits. Keep your fingers crossed, Elly. They'll be coming back to us soon enough—with their hats in their hands."

"I hope you're right," Elspeth told him. "But when I asked the question I was thinking of us, not of high politics."

"You continue to amaze me, darling," Marshal Henry told her, taking her arm gently and leading her out toward his car. "You should know by this time that there is no such thing as 'high' politics. But I think I know just the place for us to celebrate our private and personal victory dinner—and this time we'll let the bodyguards tag along."

"Sissy," she told him, but she was careful to smile when she said it.

Three more weeks passed in hectic succession while the negotiations followed their inevitable progress. For Elspeth they were weeks oddly dreamlike in essence—yet for all that oddly satisfying. Whether the emotion she felt for Marshal John Henry was love or not she neither cared nor bothered to analyze. Whatever it was it pervaded her, packed her every waking moment with a satisfying emotional excitement her inner being had not felt since her first adolescent crush. And behind this reawakening there was always the stirring accompaniment of great events in the background.

Never in her comparatively obscure life on her own prosaic world had Elspeth known the supremely human glory of being an important person. There she had been merely a young woman—moderately attractive, yet considered a bit odd for her poetic leanings, a bit frightening to most men for her intelligence.

Here and now, thanks to Mr. Horelle, she was part of the very core of a bloodless revolution that might be altering the very face and fate of a globe. She sat in on meetings with great scientists, with ambassadors, with industrialists and military leaders. Furthermore, these great folk listened to her avidly.

She and Mack were persons of mystery, of origins they could not

reveal but of resources that commanded respect. She continued to see little of Mack, of course. He had been drafted for the task of superintending the big push of tooling up for Pipit manufacture on a large scale, as well as of rushing to completion a few hand-built models.

She saw Juana often, of course—since the redhead had been assigned to be Marshal Henry's secretary. And Elspeth found her affection for the girl growing steadily, especially since her own emotions were no longer directed Mackward. But now and again she received a shock from her erstwhile rival.

One evening toward the close of the three weeks, an evening when she and the marshal had been out late testing the moonlight, Elspeth came home to find Juana curled up in the one armchair her room boasted, smoking a cigarette. The younger girl regarded her with open curiosity—and with something more disturbing in her glance.

"You've been out with my boss again," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Right," Elspeth said dreamily. She kicked off her shoes and lay back on the bed, linking fingers at the back of her neck. "I think he's perfectly perfect, Juana. He's so big and so humble, so strong and so gentle, so slow talking and so quick thinking."

"Check on all counts," said Juana. Then, "But, Elly, be careful. You won't be in this world much longer, and if you let yourself get emotionally involved you may impair your usefulness."

Elspeth regarded her uninvited guest and sensed trouble behind the limpid hazel eyes. With a spark of intuition she said, "It isn't just that. Juana. There's something else, isn't there?"

"Of course there is," Juana said slowly. "I feel like a prime crumb to say this, Elly—but dammit, he's a Negro."

"Somehow I never suspected you of *that*," said Elspeth, feeling an odd sense of disappointment. The idea of this sort of cheap race prejudice in anyone connected with the incredibly wise Mr. Horelle had never occurred to her. She felt a little ill.

"You're wrong—the things you're thinking about me, Elly," Juana said evenly. "There are a number of worlds where color doesn't matter, but this is not one of them. Nor is yours—nor mine, heaven knows."

"Then it's time something was done about it," said Elspeth, still hot under the neckline.

"I wish you knew how hard we all have worked for it—*are* working for it," Juana told her. "On world after world—even back before Mr.

Horelle had charge! But progress is so stinking slow. Which is why I'm sticking my hot little neck out and trying to warn you, Elly. You look just like a girl who's falling in love—and you mustn't. It's not your job."

"I'm sorry I blew my top," said Elspeth. She sat up and reached for a cigarette, tossed the pack to Juana. The sincerity in that lovely voluptuous little face defied doubt. As she inhaled she was suddenly able to see herself as this girl must see her, as Mack . . . But quickly and sharply she told herself that she no longer gave a damn about Mack or what Mack thought of her. He had no business having any opinions at all about her.

"Perhaps," she went on finally, "I'm in love with an idea rather than with a man, but you'll have to admit he's gorgeous."

"Strictly for the birds," said Juana, and they both grinned. Had they been a few years younger they would have giggled. A few minutes later, cigarette finished, Juana rose to leave. At the door she said, "Have your fun, Elly—you have a right to it—but don't let the current carry you away. You're needed."

Elspeth nodded and frowned thoughtfully at the closing door. She felt suddenly a little begrimed. Falling in love had always come as easily to her as breathing. At various times she had oozed emotion over a math teacher—she hated figures—a pimply delivery boy, a small bird that had nested outside her window, a lady athletic coach at school, a Canadian lacrosse professional, a writer with a most unusual straggly pink goatee, a famous actress who had been kind to her on an early newspaper-interviewing assignment.

But love itself was something that had not come easily to her—it had not come at all as yet. Within herself she had always held in reserve something indefinable, something which she had never intended to give up until she knew herself to be honestly and irretrievably a lover—a lover beloved.

She thought, lying there, that she had almost certainly been the worst sort of a triple fool to have so withheld this part of herself. But even as she gave utterance to this silent self-condemnation she knew that it was as much a part of her as her eyelashes. It was something she had not been able to help, something she would never be able to change merely by wishing.

Yet Juana had done a great deal for her. The redhead had showed her that her current emotional upheaval over Marshal John was not

the real love for which she had waited so long. She *was* infatuated with the idea of Marshal Henry—perhaps with the man himself. But she did not love him. And in pretending to she had done him a grave injustice.

She turned out the light, stripped off her clothes quickly and crept raw between the coarse linen sheets of her cot. Somehow the rough surface against her skin, replacing the silk of her nightgown, helped to salve a sorely torn conscience.

Being unworldly and utterly honest, she looked for a chance to tell Marshal Henry the truth about her feelings the next day. But the marshal was not there. He had taken off hurriedly to deal with a snag that had developed in the negotiations, was en route to Brownsville. He had left her a brief note. It read:

*Elly—If I could think of anything to compensate for the loss of your presence—a flower, a jewel, a bit of verse—I would leave it with this note. Unfortunately, darling, I can think of nothing but you. So be patient until I return. Times will not always be as difficult for us.*  
John

Elspeth looked at it again, then at Juana, who had handed it to her. Impulsively she handed it back for the girl to read. Juana studied it, reread it, then passed it to Elspeth without a word. But her large dark eyes were suspiciously bright.

"Does this mean trouble?" Elspeth asked.

Juana hesitated, then nodded. "I'm afraid so. The Columbian leaders are making outrageous demands, based on having the disintegrator. I'm waiting for a message right now. We may have more of a job on our hands than we figured."

"Then John Henry was right all along," Elspeth told Juana. She went on to explain the fears he had expressed after Reed Weston's first flight in the Pipit, and concluded with, "I do hope it isn't going to be serious—really serious."

"So do I—or rather we," Juana replied quietly. "It's balled things up rather—so be ready for anything. See you later."

She strolled away toward her office, and Elspeth, feeling utterly at a loss, wandered around until she managed to hitch a ride with one of the headquarters chauffeurs to where Mack was working. To her surprise, she was driven right past the long factory shed, where the Pipits

were in process of manufacture, to the larger plant surrounding the space-rocket launching field. "He's over there," her driver informed her, pointing. "I can't drive you any closer."

Mack, sleeves rolled up, his eyes clear, his face tanned, one cheek grimy, was glowering happily at a set of blueprints in a special steel shed that adjoined the rocket-launching platform. Surrounding him were a group of leathery-skinned engineers.

"Hi, Elly," he greeted her, and once more she was surprised by the unexpected charm of his lopsided grin. He seemed genuinely glad to see her. He looked, she thought, a little thin, and she felt an unexpected but wholly maternal desire to chide him for not taking better care of himself.

Then he was beside her, his brawny arm across her shoulders, introducing her to the others. "This is my sidekick," he told them. "Elly's slumming."

"I am *not*!" she replied with dismal lack of wit. "I've—well, it's just that I've been rather busy myself."

"That we know," said Mack, chaffing but not jeering. He drew her aside with a nod of apology to the others, walked her out onto the great flat launching area. "Heard the news? I just got word from Juana. There's a jam in the works and we're cutting out of here tomorrow. We've got another job on our hands if we're to make this one work."

"You mean—we're leaving this world?" she asked, unbelieving in the face of what had to be fact. Mack nodded.

"We're just about washed up here anyway," he said. "You and Juana and I. The Pipits—Reed Weston version—are already in full production, and I've just about got these spaceship plans to a T. It's a good thing I got some engineering under my belt when I was young and foolish. Some of the techniques these chaps have developed are miles ahead of ours. I've been treading deep water for a month now."

"But where are we going?" Elspeth inquired, desperately curious and upset. Everyone but she seemed to have some knowledge of what was happening. "Back to Spindrift Key and Mr. Horelle?"

"Eventually, I suppose—if we're lucky," Mack told her, lighting a cigarette and as usual forgetting to give her one. "Juana has the info—just got it, I gather. From what she told me I think we've got another job before we finish this one—on still another world. It seems our assignment here dovetails into a situation there or something."

"Holy cow!" said Elly inelegantly. This took a bit of getting used to. She was not at all certain that she could withstand the various wrenches and upheavals involved in adjustment to yet another version of Earth so soon—to say nothing of playing an active role in a fresh major crisis.

Then she looked up at Mack, saw his serene readiness, realized that their roles had been reversed. It was she who had embarked upon the assignment lightheartedly, while Mack had had difficulty in fitting himself to the parallel time-track theorem. She understood now why Juana had visited her the night before, had warned her not to get in too deeply with the marshal, had deftly exposed the fraudulent roots of her love. Her respect for Juana rose another notch.

"All right, Mack," she said, putting her hands in her jacket pockets. "When, where, how, and why?"

"Juana has the orders," Mack repeated. "We tee off for Natches tonight. I have a hunch we'll move from there."

"Just give me my cues," said Elspeth. "I think I'd better get back to what are laughingly called my lodgings and pack."

"Swell," Mack told her. "We'll probably fly down in the Pipit. And don't let your poetic soul go chasing after a trick cloud formation or a flock of birdies on the way. We want all of your celebrated poetic wits at this stage of the game."

She stared hard at the lower part of his face, squinting a little. Mack blinked, finally blurted, "What in hell's the matter? Something wrong with me, Elly?"

"Your mouth," she replied ungently. "It's far too big." With which she walked back to her car and chauffeur, feeling so well pleased with herself that she tripped and all but fell over a small stone in the launching field.

But on the way back to headquarters her thoughts were not pleasant. So the assignment was going on and they were to travel to still another Earth. She sought to consider the hows and whys without attaining constructive results. In the end she sighed and leaned back against the cushions, closing her eyes.

Mack was going too. Juana of course had seen to that. The big lug carried and fetched like some outside bird dog at every crook of her little finger. Yes, Mack, who had reacted in such ornery fashion to forced entry into the Columbian world, was muzzled and sitting up, paws in air, all but pleading to visit another alien world—because the



lush little so-and-so had flashed a soft dark eye in his direction.

She opened her own eyes and said some most unladylike words, for she knew now that she was hooked inextricably in the interworld parade. It was, she thought, an unforeseen and dismal fate for a young lady who had once said "Rabbit" for good luck before opening her eyes on the first day of each and every month.

She did not see either of her co-agents until early that evening, when, after a wretched and lonely afternoon, she assembled with them and their luggage and a Mack-trained Pipit driver in the parking lot. Perhaps because of the chauffeur Mack said little during their flight to Natchez, and Juana was carefully casual in such remarks as she chose to make. It was well after midnight when they boarded a rocket train in the ornate but barnlike Natchez station, and by that time Elspeth was so tired and unhappy that she had almost lost interest in all tangential worlds.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**E**LSPETH DID NOT awaken from the sleep of exhaustion that overwhelmed her aboard the train until their swift rocket-powered transport slowed jerkily to a stop at St. Louis. She moaned and rolled over in her bed, and an outflung arm struck the wall of the compartment beside her. This contact restored her suddenly to full consciousness. She sat up, yawning, and rubbed her eyes.

The train did another stop-start lurch as it rounded a curve, all but tossing her against the wall. Apparently while the rocket drive could get them under way smoothly and with immense acceleration, braking to a stop was a far rougher business.

Elspeth peered through the small round window placed at the head of her luxurious bunk and saw that they were in fact in the process of entering a city. Outside the sunlight was brilliant and the watch on her wrist informed her that it was almost noon.

They had proceeded to the Natchez station by devious routes after landing the Pipit—even though it was obvious that some sort of safe-conduct had been arranged for them by agents of the Watchers. Luckily their train was awaiting them, its rockets damped but ready. They had been quickly bundled aboard its final car, a brilliant affair of indigo, white, and silver, liberally plastered with coats of arms. This car, Juana informed them, was to be their residence throughout the brief remainder of their first stay in the Columbian world.

At that moment Elspeth had again hated the smaller girl. Juana seemed as gay and high-spirited as a teen-ager boarding a vacation special after a dreary term away at school. Mack had been hot and tired and thoroughly out of sorts, and as for herself, Elspeth had felt utterly wilted, inside and out.

There had been plenty of cause—the long strain of their perilous assignment and the sudden knowledge that, on the brink of its successful conclusion, even more work lay in front of them—not to mention Elspeth's emotional uncertainty over her relations with the black marshal. But, cause or not, an involuntary glimpse of herself in a station-concourse mirror had put the final crusher upon her morale. She had looked, she discovered, at least as badly as she felt.

"Let's take over the last three staterooms," Juana had suggested as an obsequious blond-haired porter ushered them into the ornate car that was to take them—where?

A full two-thirds of its length in front was taken up with vestibule, aisle, and a half-dozen large staterooms, neatly lined up along one side. The final third of the car was a combined observation lounge and buffet, fitted out with every luxury conceivable in the Columbian world. The *décor* was baroque but charming, and featured lacy mahogany grillwork, gold leaf and ivory-leather chairs on deep-piled indigo carpet.

"This is Minister of Finance Alston's own private car," the tall heavy-set steward had informed them in a rich accent as he stowed their belongings expertly in the rooms they selected for themselves. He had seemed to be inordinately proud of the fact.

Mack, Elspeth had noticed with interest, refused to give up possession of a heavy-looking leather attaché case. He had even kept it stowed tightly between his legs when they adjourned to the buffet lounge for a nightcap after the train got under way. She wondered vaguely what it contained, but had been too spent to inquire. There would be time for that later.

"What in hell are you so happy about?" she had inquired of Juana bluntly over the top of her glass.

For answer Juana had hummed an unfamiliar little phrase of song—something light and colorful and with a beat utterly unfamiliar to Elspeth. Then Juana had said, putting the sparkle of her highball in the shade. "We're going to *my* world this time. *Home!*"

"What sort of a place is it, baby?" Mack had inquired, showing definite interest. Damn him, Elspeth had thought, he was probably expecting it to be full of Juanas.

But Juana had merely laughed and told him, "You'll find out soon enough for yourselves, dear ones."

"When are we going to make the—the change or whatever you call it?" Mack had inquired, his curiosity, unslaked, merely veering onto another path.

But Juana had chosen to answer that one, saying, "We make transfer at the next tangential point—somewhere in Kansas. I believe—close to Topeka. I think the cyclones have something to do with it."

"That's right," Mack had mused. "Come to think of it, Hatteras is quite a storm center too."

"If you lovely, lovely people will deign to excuse me," Elspeth had said then, barely covering a jaw-cracking yawn, "I'm going to place

this beautiful pagan body of mine sandwich-fashion between a pair of sheets. I'm a wreck and I know it."

Their good nights had been casual and disinterested, even to this somewhat tired bit of wit, and Elspeth had retired, bruised in body, spirit and, above all, ego, to her stateroom. She had been fully determined to lie awake all night just to spite herself, as well as to abrade the fifth-wheel feeling from which she was suffering—to cure which it was her purpose to relive every moment of her romance with the black marshal. She had got as far as the New Orleans balcony episode when slumber roadblocked and ambushed her — and this time Marshal Henry failed to rescue her.

Now it was noon the next day and they were coming into a large city. She wondered what town it was and then caught sight of a huge track-side signboard advertising a St. Louis lager and surmised quite correctly their whereabouts. It was here, according to Juana's information of the night before, that their private car was to be shunted onto the rear of another train—this one bound for California. She decided to get up and see what was going on. Also, she was ravenously hungry.

Mack and Juana were already in the lounge—Mack in his striped robe, Juana poured into a breath-taking negligee—when Elspeth, feeling about one-quarter groomed, emerged from her stateroom fully dressed. There were appetizing aromas of bacon, toast, and coffee in the atmosphere, and the steward, whose name was Soames, greeted her with a smile that looked almost genuine.

"Hi, you people, you," Elspeth said to both of them without discrimination. "You're looking stinkingly well fed and pleased with yourselves." She noted with rising curiosity that Mack still had the attaché case thrust between his legs.

"May I prepare you some breakfast, Miss Marriner?" the beaming Soames inquired politely. Elspeth shook her head.

"No—no breakfast, thanks," she told him with one ear cocked to hear the clamoring demands of her stomach. "What can you fix me in the way of a full meal?"

What Soames proceeded to fix within the limited confines of his shining little copper kitchenette proved to be nothing short of miraculous. First upon his menu was a thick hot soup of a cream-beef-chicken-and-claret base that was unlike anything in Elspeth's memory but was incredibly delicious. He followed this masterpiece with a thick and tender small steak, charcoal-broiled, soufflé potatoes, asparagus hol-

landaise, a tossed green salad and, for a finisher, a rich zabaglione accompanied by a steaming café-royale, rich with brandy.

"These female poets with their ethereal appetites!" murmured Mack *sotto voce* as Elspeth downed the last of her salad. Soames, grinning to see his work so appreciated, removed it in favor of the zabaglione, whose semi-liquid yellow richness he spooned from a small tureen.

"Quiet, Mack!" said Juana sternly. "Can't you see this woman is hungry?"

"I think that for her it's just a snack," said the photographer. Elspeth gave him a Mack look, but forbore to speak.

She took three spoonfuls of the zabaglione and began to realize that, although it was miraculously good, she was not going to be able to eat any more. She apologized to Soames and suggested to Juana and Mack that they help her get rid of it. When they turned her down with mock scorn she announced, "Soames, if you think for a moment I'm going to let this get away, you're out of your mind. Put it in my stateroom and I'll get to it later."

The steward grinned and took it away as ordered and Elspeth sat back, at peace with the world and herself. She lit a cigarette and sipped her café-royale, letting its warmth and strength flow through her. Mack leaned toward her across the car and said assiduously, "Elly, are you sure you wouldn't rather have a large black cigar?"

"Mack! You'll make her sick," said Juana sharply. "Stop being so mean to Elly."

"That's my Mack—the only Mack I know," Elspeth informed her. She transferred her attention to the photographer, nodded toward the attaché case still between his legs. "By the way, Mack darling, I'm curious. Are you attached to that thing by an umbilical cord, or what?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" he said crustily, then smiled as Juana snickered. "I'm not supposed to let this out of touch—literally," he explained. "It holds the space-ship blueprints and a sample of the trick fuel Weston invented. It seems he developed some sort of atomic release our next world is going to need."

"Incidentally, friends," said Juana, sitting up straight and tucking her perfect little legs under her, "since we're already high-tailing it across Missouri I might as well brief you on what's ahead. We'll be working against a deadline."

Mack and Elspeth settled themselves to listen and Juana went on. "In the first place, this dear old world of mine we are about to enter

is in a free-wheeling jam that makes our little Mexican-Columbian fracas look like a game of battledore and shuttlecock." She paused and looked thoughtfully straight ahead.

"Okay," she resumed. "Here it is. There are two whole sets of wars in the making—not wars involving mere nations or even hemispheres but the entire world. It has happened a couple of times before and we've pulled through somehow—but this time, if it starts, it may mean the end of civilization, maybe even of life itself."

"Must be nice people where you come from," said Mack pursing his lips.

"Shut up, stupid," said Juana amiably. "It isn't the people's fault. Nor is it their leaders' What happened in my world—unlike this world we are leaving—is that our science went galloping ahead so fast it left our culture hopelessly behind. As a result everything got out of whack. It was like giving a disintegrator to a nine-year-old boy.

"For instance, our medical techniques got so good that the world population has tripled in a little over three generations," she went on. "Result—chaos except in a few spots, mostly in the Western Hemisphere. Asia is the big threat. They have more than a billion people combined with ancient ideas of statism—ideas they have dressed up in new clothing. At the moment we have them checked in Western Europe through technological superiority—so they have transferred their aggressions eastward.

"China, Malaya, Japan, and Indonesia have fallen to the Asiatic dictator, and India is in a ferment. He offers the usual revolutionary panaceas to the so-called common man, then turns him into a slave to his system. The scheme is older than the pyramids, but it seems as if people never will learn."

"And just how is the space ship supposed to help?" Elspeth inquired.

"Hold your ponies," said Juana pertly. "I'm coming to it. The President of the United States—he's the third Roosevelt to hold that office—has summoned a conference of the so-called Atlantic Powers and South America in San Francisco in an effort to increase their awareness of the menace to freedom from Asia.

"It is not going to be successful. The European nations are concerned only with their own front yards, and South America is resentful because the United States has thus far focused most of its attention and money on maintaining the barrier in Europe. Something is needed

not only to shock the world out of its trauma but to offer it a new hope of release from its population dilemma."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," said Elspeth, frowning. "You believe space flight will do it?" She paused, added, "But how will that straighten things out for Reed Weston?"

"Listen," said Juana with quiet authority. "With what Reed Weston has learned about Mars' habitability, it should do the trick. It's a thousand-to-one shot that Mars will be habitable in my world—this world we're coming into. It's our job to put the contents of Mack's attaché case into the hands of President Roosevelt himself—and to see that he realizes its value."

"But what about the stalemate or whatever it is here in Columbia?" Elspeth asked stubbornly.

"I was coming to that," said Juana. "The big hitch in the local negotiations is that while the Pipit gives its owners mobility in a military sense it does not stop the disintegrator. Well, it just happens that on my world they have what Mr. Horelle believes is a shield. We trade our space flight and fuel for this."

"How come they've got it on your world and not on Weston's?" Mack asked, frowning in thought.

Juana shrugged. "There's a lot of luck as well as necessity in scientific discovery, Mack. It just happens my world has it—as probably a lot of other worlds do too. So the Watchers were able to hold our missions together by a simple reswitch of schedules."

"You mean we were going to this world anyhow?" Elspeth asked. Juana nodded. Mack frowned again.

"How much time have we got?" he asked.

Some of Juana's assurance seemed to fade. She said slowly, "Just one week—that's when Reed Weston must have his answer or else."

"Sounds like a large package," said Mack doubtfully.

"It is, of course—but it's not impossible," Juana replied with quiet confidence. "You two are not yet aware of the resources the Watchers possess. And there is a plan, naturally. President Roosevelt happens to be extremely devoted to his daughter—and his daughter is intensely ambitious in a literary way. In short, she wants to be a poetess." Juana's dark eyes came to rest on Elspeth.

"I'm not sure I understand this!" exclaimed the latter with a sudden sense of panic. "How is her wanting to write poetry going——"

"It will," said Juana, smiling. "You see, you are going to arrive in

San Francisco as an extremely well-known *avant garde* lady poet from England. Don't worry, that's already arranged." She nodded toward a book on the table at her elbow and said, "We have even managed to have some of your poems published by an English house in this world of mine we are about to enter."

"But that's unbelievable!" gasped Elspeth. She rose and took the book from the table, leafed through it with trembling fingers. Incredibly, although paper and binding were of a type unfamiliar to her, her verses were there, the so-slim little end product of so many hours and days and months and years of soul-searching thought and work.

She turned to the contents page, felt sudden nostalgia quicken within her at the sight of the titles—*My Love Is Yesterday*, *Luisa*, *Irish Sea*, *The Slender Wing*, and all the so-well-remembered others. Slowly her surroundings faded and she was no longer on this alien train, speeding inexorably toward an alien destination in an alien world.

She was once again, through a rollback of time, in the company of a black-haired young ruffian named Kevin, who had made violent and romantic love to her on a windy afternoon in an ancient ruin of a castle keep overlooking St. George's Channel. She was again straining to follow the flight of a swift gray-blue swallow as it darted and soared amid the chaste spires and brick chimney tops of a green-and-white New England town. She was once again back amid an incredible cluster of brilliant . . .

Mack whistled, long, loud and shrill, said, "For Chrissakes come out of it, Elly."

She did, apologetically as always, laid down the little volume and smiled sheepishly at Juana, who smiled back sympathetically. "I'm sorry," she told them. "But seeing my work just now brought back memories I was unable to escape."

"You're fortunate to be able to wrap yourself in dreams," said Juana, and drew a look of utter incredulity from the more practical Mack. Juana ignored it and went on with her briefing of Elly. "You'll be interviewed by the press within an hour of your arrival. From the moment the stories appear things will take care of themselves."

"And what about you two in this picture?" Elspeth inquired.

Juana laughed. "Oh, we're your entourage," she explained. "I'm your personal attendant—take care of all the mundane details your poetic soul refuses to handle. As for Mack"—she twinkled a sidelong glance at the photographer—"he's going to be your secretary. It seems



you can't abide to work with women. Incidentally, we travel with you everywhere. Get that, Elly—*everywhere!*"

"Hold on," said Mack, his face red beneath its tan. "Do you mean I have to traipse around as Elly's personal stooge? Good God! Not only am I nobody's secretary, but I don't know the——"

"*Mack!*" Juana quelled his outburst. "Elly will be our one direct contact with President Roosevelt. She's the star of this act, and can you think of a better excuse for lugging that attaché case with you everywhere than as a private secretary?"

Mack muttered and fumed volcanically for a while, then subsided. Finally he said, "But when your President gets this space-flight data what's he going to do with it?"

"He is going to offer it to the United Nations," Juana replied, "the moment it is successful. It will not only give the billion and a quarter people of Asia a chance, but will focus all the world's hope, rather than their hatred, on America."

"Why don't the damn fools try birth control?" said Mack.

"Emotionally and religiously they simply aren't geared to it," replied Juana. "That is perhaps their greatest tragedy."

They continued to discuss aspects of the assignment as the rocket train sped across the plains of Missouri. Later they played cards, had cocktails and dinner. They had barely finished their salad course when they passed through Kansas City.

"This go-wagon makes time," Mack remarked.

"She makes almost two hundred over a straight flat stretch like this one," Soames informed them as he put a trio of enticing fruit compotes on the table. "She's only slow up the river."

After dinner, at Juana's suggestion, Elspeth read some of Christine Roosevelt's poems. They were, as she had expected, neither good nor bad—typical verses by an intelligent well-bred reasonably well-educated girl with a slight flair for word rhythms.

If the President's daughter had ever felt an unorthodox emotion there was no hint of it in her neatly scanned iambic, trochaic and anapaestic lines. This, Elspeth sensed, was a well-disciplined young lady. And to Elspeth both discipline and lady-ism were the sworn enemies of true poetry.

She wondered how on earth—whatever Earth this was—she was going to find anything kind to say about such face-lifted doggerel. She decided to concentrate upon being nice about a neat turn of phrase

here and there amid the mediocrity. In toto Christine Roosevelt's verse was inconsequential—not bad nor anything else.

"I had a hunch you'd find you had a job on your hands," said Juana, correctly interpreting Elspeth's expression from her armchair on the other side of the lounge. "Incidentally, Elly, I read your verse too—and was impressed. You don't write crud."

"What a ghastly word—and thought!" said Elspeth, laughing in spite of herself. She tapped the book of verse by the President's daughter. "But as for this—don't worry. I'll manage."

"You can always call on your secretary if the more delicate nuances elude you," said Juana, her face perfectly straight.

"Quiet, please," snapped Mack, "for the benefit of those who have expired." He lapsed into the dazed surliness that had enveloped him since Juana had informed him what part he was to play in their forthcoming incursion into her world.

As the evening wore on Elspeth found herself baffled by the relationship between Mack and Juana. Whatever it had been—and she knew it had been plenty—it was strictly business now. She had an idea, from the way both were behaving, that it was Juana who had slammed the door. Mack seemed to be the unhappy one.

She thought it served the big tomcat right. But being woman and intrigued with the photographer despite herself, she could not quite restrain a faint sense of resentment at Juana for having so casually won and so cavalierly discarded him.

It was close upon midnight when the train once more went into the series of lurches that announced it was slowing for a stop. Soames, the steward, appeared from somewhere, wearing his overcoat and carrying a small black bag. "I'm to leave you alone in the car on the side track and stay forward with the rest of the train?" he asked Juana.

The redhead nodded. "Right, Soames, and thanks for taking such good care of us. You'll find the car all right when the train comes back to pick it up in"—she glanced at her jeweled wrist watch—"exactly seventeen minutes. Good-by, Soames."

She opened her bag and handed the steward a bill of large denomination. He bowed to all of them and moved forward out of sight through the corridor. Juana's lips tightened and she seemed to stiffen when the train finally halted. "Transfer time," she said.

"What do we do?" Elspeth asked her, frightened.

"Relax," said Juana, taking a deep breath. "Don't ask me how it

works. You went through it once and know as much as I do. Better move all your gear back here." She nodded toward their luggage, which Soames had piled neatly at the front of the lounge. "The new car may be of different design forward and things might get lost."

Elsbeth discovered that her handbag was missing and went to her stateroom to get it. As she opened the door she could look ahead to the front of the car, could see the receding rocket flares of what had been their train moving slowly ahead on the siding. It gave her an unpleasantly lonely sensation.

She found her bag stuck in the washroom where she had left it, and slung it over her shoulder. Then she noticed the silver tureen of zabaglione which Soames had left for her. A taste of it, she decided, might help to settle the queasiness that had settled in her stomach since the train had begun to slow down.

Elsbeth lifted the silver lid and reached for the silver ladle within the bowl. Then she stood frozen, staring down into it. The bowl was empty.

It had not been washed. There were well-scraped traces of foamy yellow clinging to its curved sides and to the ladle. And similar traces on one of the three small dessert cups on the tray beside the tureen. Someone had eaten every bit of it.

It must have been Soames, she thought. But it *couldn't* have been Soames. Had he wanted some, he'd have made more for himself. Mack might have eaten it, but he had professed an ardent dislike of all shapes and forms of Italian cooking, from antipasto to *caffè espresso*. And somehow she knew Juana wouldn't have . . .

Like Goldilocks, she thought, and the Three Bears—and for the first time she wondered if the little bear had felt a fear to match the rising tide of panic within herself. Of course the little bear had had his father and mother along for security, while she had—Juana and Mack.

With this thought she hurried from the stateroom and back along the corridor to the lounge. She wanted to tell them what had happened, to find out if either of them knew anything about it. She had just passed the pile of luggage when the darkness came.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**A**LL IN ALL, the black vacuum could scarcely have endured for more than two or three minutes. But to Elspeth, already fighting panic over the mysteriously eaten zabaglione in her stateroom, out of physical contact with either Mack or Juana, it seemed like a lifetime of Dante-esque horror. She was further startled by an unfamiliar drumming noise until she discovered that it came from the chattering of her own teeth. Fighting the inner and outer chill that seemed about to overwhelm her, she forced herself to stand perfectly still in the blank void, wondering what cosmic changes were happening about her, feeling cold sweat bead her forehead.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the darkness was gone. There was Mack, looking in her direction with an expression on his face that seemed to ask what that damned chucklehead had done now to foul things up. There was Juana, also looking her way, her dark eyes wide with concern. In the gush of relief she felt at being once more able to see them, in her interest in their changed surroundings, Elspeth completely forgot the panic that had shaken her so completely in the stateroom minutes before.

Gone with the darkness were the gingerbread, gilt, ivory and azure decorations of Minister of Finance Alston's private car. In their place was a subtly severe modern lounge section of glass and stainless steel and carefully grained blond woods, and carpet and upholstery of pastel tweed. Lighting was, for the most part, soft and indirect, and at the partition which divided observation lounge from forward stateroom section stood a curved satinwood bar, backed by a glittering array of glassware and bottles and a brilliantly colored mural in sophisticated imitation of a Hopi Indian primitive.

"It's like making an aircraft-carrier landing at sea," said Juana, exhaling her relief and then lighting a cigarette with fingers that caused the lighter flame to dip and tremble. "No matter how many times you make it safely you're always glad to get through it okay—or so some of the boys have told me."

There were sounds of a train backing toward them, followed by a slight jar as the coupling was completed. Then, acquiring impetus more slowly but far more smoothly than in the rocket-driven train, they got under way once more. Less than thirty seconds later an ebony-hued steward in starched white jacket was moving toward them

from the corridor, smiling and inquiring if they had any preferences as to the staterooms they wished him to make up for them.

"Wonder whose car we drew this time?" murmured Mack, looking about him in speculative fashion. "My, things certainly have changed!"

"I believe it belongs to one of the wealthier members of a family named Vanderbilt," Juana told them. "They're quite big stuff in this world—finance, sports, politics, the works."

"Likewise in our world," said Mack. "I did a feature once on their sixty-room summer shack in Newport. But I never dreamed I'd be roughing it in one of their private land yachts."

They decided to simplify matters by selecting staterooms that corresponded to those they had occupied in Finance Minister Alston's car. Elspeth found hers to be even more compact and comfortable and well arranged than its predecessor. She looked for and noted the absence of the omnipresent dental powder of the Columbian world. Alone in front of her mirror, she felt a quick pang of homesickness for Marshal John—followed by a twinge of recurrent panic over the empty tureen of zabaglione.

But the very thought of that elaborate sterling-silver tureen, she decided, was anachronistic in this neatly modernized world. It belonged with Reed Weston and Marshal John and, yes, with the viciously effete Everard van Hooten, to the picturesque world they had so recently left. As she strolled back to the lounge to rejoin Mack and Juana she wondered why, at such a time, she should have thought of the orchidaceous Everard at all.

Their new steward, whose name was Marcus, proved fully as courteous an attendant and an even swifter and defter drink mixer than Soames. Yet, sitting on soft tweed upholstery and sipping a tall frosted rum punch through a long straw, Elspeth again felt her tensions and worries tauten within her. They had only six days left in which to accomplish their vastly complex mission.

She thought of Marshal Henry's precarious position and hated the fact that there was nothing to do but relax and rest until they reached San Francisco. But it did not prove exactly restful. She and Mack pounded questions at Juana about the locale of their new assignment until the little red-head smilingly begged off on the grounds of fatigue and departed alone for her stateroom and bed.

Looking after her, Elspeth shook her ash-blond head and said to Mack, "There goes the most amazing person I have ever met."

"You can say that again and again," said Mack softly into his drink. "You have no idea *how* amazing." A dreamy cat-plus-canary film overspread his countenance.

Elsbeth felt a sudden surge of desire to grab the photographer's short heavy hair with both fists and pull it out in clumps. However, she somehow managed to restrain herself—or perhaps her bringing up did it for her. Instead she said savagely, "You don't seem to be doing so well in that quarter yourself any more, sugar plum," and, picking up the two volumes of poetry, took off with what she hoped was a fair imitation of haughty disdain for her own stateroom.

It was her intention to put in at least another hour of swotting over the poetry of Christine Roosevelt, but the motion of the train was satin smooth and the rum drinks apparently more potent than their bland texture had suggested. It was a mere matter of minutes before she fell asleep, barely remembering in time to switch off the convenient little wall reading lamp at the head of her bunk.

Elsbeth felt fed, rested and more than ready to face the problems of two new worlds as their train pulled into San Francisco late the following afternoon. Her tension and fears had faded with her awakening that morning, and a mounting excitement over the experiences that lay ahead had seen to it that they had not returned.

A glance at Mack, sitting upright in his chair, showed her that the photographer too was thoroughly keyed for whatever might lie before them. Despite the impassiveness of his rather battered face, it was there in the slightly aggressive set of his shoulders, in the careful reserve of his movements as he studied in an opposite-wall mirror the cut of the clothes he was wearing. They were not quite a perfect fit, but they had a smart cool-weather look that would have been alien in the hot Columbian capital.

Juana appeared, to Elsbeth, incredibly well poised for a young woman returning to her own world after long absence, but unuttered emotion glowed in her large dark eyes, and during the day she had been given to unusual periods of silence that increased in direct proportion to their approach to the West Coast city.

Having registered these opinions to herself, Elsbeth was in the act of contemplating her own appearance—in a rakishly cut dress of gray flannel with a diagonal white stripe and a soft-brimmed white felt hat that put unexpected but definitely intriguing shadows beneath her

eyes, an outfit furnished like Mack's new garments and Juana's by the generous owner of the car—when sudden sounds of a violent scuffle somewhere forward brought her quickly to full attention.

The train was in the act of pulling into the terminal, and Marcus, the new steward, had been checking over the compartments and preparing to disembark their gear. Elspeth heard his soft southern voice cry out in sudden alarm, heard the thuddings of a number of hard fist blows, followed quickly by an unpleasant noise that was half gurgle, half scream quickly cut off.

"Hi-yi!" shouted Mack, leaping from his chair and moving swiftly forward through the corridor in the direction of the sounds of fracas, still carrying the attaché case. Peering after him, Elspeth saw him reach the door of the stateroom from which the fight noises seemed to be coming, turn in to enter the room on the run, still shouting.

Elspeth did not see or register accurately much of what happened in the next few seconds. A fist iashed out through the door without warning, nailing the onrushing photographer with impeccable precision full on the point of the chin. Mack's head flew back with such sudden violence that Elspeth screamed, afraid that his neck was broken. Arms flailing, attaché case and all, he was literally flung back across the corridor, which he momentarily filled with his bulk.

Just at that instant a slimmer male figure seemed almost to fly out of the contested stateroom, to race quickly forward toward the next car. In view of the confusion he left in his wake, it was utterly out of the question for either of the girls to get as much as a clear view of his back. And before either girl could reach Mack, who was leaning against the corridor wall, his eyes glassy, the interloper had slammed the door of the private car behind him and vanished.

Mack, Elspeth decided, must have kept his grip on the attaché case by sheer reflex action. Certainly he was completely out on his feet. He looked at both Juana and herself, as they rushed up, without a trace of recognition, then began slowly to fall forward away from the wall. Elspeth could think of nothing to do but push him back against it by putting her left hand against his chest, thus holding him upright while she tried, foolishly, to fan him back to life with her handbag.

Juana, who had produced unexpectedly a small but very wicked-looking automatic pistol, which she handled in a highly professional fashion, darted past the pair of them into the compartment. She was still inside when Mack, with the first stirrings of consciousness, took

an awkward round-house swing at Elspeth, knocking her white felt hat half off her head.

For some reason this made her furious and effectively smothered the sympathy she had been feeling. "You big blind baboon!" she shouted. "I thought you used to be a fighter. Can't you even stay out of the way of a fist?"

Mack shook his head and peered at her, but his eyes were still clouded. "Sonuvabitch hit me—when I wasn' lookin'," he mumbled. With which he attempted to take another poke at Elspeth, who lost her head and brought her handbag hard against the side of his head. For some reason this seemed to clear it and he looked at her and blinked.

"What happened?" he asked stupidly. Elspeth stepped clear of him, as he seemed once more steady on his feet, and Juana called them from the open stateroom. Marcus, it appeared, was in far worse shape than Mack.

Juana was calmly putting her pistol away in her bag when they entered. "There's no sense in trying a pursuit," she said calmly, although an unusual vertical furrow marred the smooth surface of her brow. "He's got clean away by this time. Come on, Mack, give us a hand with poor Marcus. Whoever it was certainly laid it on him."

She helped hold the poor unfortunate steward's gory head steady while a still-dazed and thoroughly chastened Mack did the heavy job of stretching Marcus out on the bunk. The colored man was badly meased about. Blood was welling from a two-inch cut inder his right eye, and even his dark skin could not hide signs of further battering. By using the towels and water handy in the stateroom lavatory, they managed to get him pretty well cleaned up and the blood stanchd before he opened his eyes and moaned.

"Donno who done it to me," he said when he was sufficiently recovered to answer questions as to what had happened. "I jes' come in here to see the room's in shape for Mr. V. when—*powie!*—the lights go on all over the place."

"Did you get a look at him, Marcus?" Mack asked eagerly. "Even an impression will help."

"All I know is that he sure could hit," said the steward. "I thought he'd pulverized me fo' sure. An' my neck—it feels like I jes' stepped down from a necktie party." His face clouded and he looked ready



for tears. "I sure am sorry to have had it happen. I guess I jes' wasn't doin' my job right, folks."

"You were fine, Marcus. It wasn't your fault, whatever happened—you can depend on that," said Juana soothingly. "Now, unless you want us to call you a doctor or an ambulance let's forget it ever happened. Okay, Marcus?"

"I donno about that," said the steward, looking relieved. "I'm not like to forget it. But I'll be all right, Miss Juana."

"Swell," said Juana, "but don't take chances. Just in case you do have any aftereffects . . ." She handed him a bill of very large denomination—a type of money new to Elspeth and Mack—and the three of them went on belatedly about their business of getting off the train.

Juana handled matters with brisk efficiency once they reached the platform. She acquired porters and a taxicab and informed a trio of reporters who had turned up to meet the celebrated English poetess that they would interview any of the press who cared to see her later at the hotel. She did not waste a word until the three of them were safely installed in a broad-windowed suite on an upper story of a caravansary whose hill setting overlooked the incredible nature-and-manmade magnificence of San Francisco Bay.

Then, leaning back in an armchair and lighting a cigarette, she curtly interrupted Elspeth's rhapsodic delight in the view and Mack's mutterings about having walked into a sneak-punch with an unexpectedly stern and forthright little diatribe.

"I neither understand nor like what happened just now on that train," she informed them. "One of the greatest advantages we of the interworld service have—and one of its basic reasons for absolute secrecy—is that we can move into whatever world needs us most without warning elements that might conceivably be able to oppose us effectively granted time to prepare."

"In other words, you're afraid your Asiatic friends may be ready to play rough," Mack said thoughtfully. "Funny, I got that impression when you briefed us on the situation last night."

"But how could they know?" said Juana, looking baffled. "There can't have been a leak. Even if there had been one, no supposedly sane person would believe it. That's one of our greatest protections—no one except the initiate ever has."

"There has to be a first time, honey," Mack said softly.

"Oh!" Elspeth sat up straight on the windowseat and one of her

hands flew to her mouth. She had just remembered the incident of the zabaglione. She told them about it.

"It's possible," said Juana, frowning again. "Though if it happened, it's the first interworld stowaway in history so far as I know. And if it did happen it only makes things worse."

"You mean that it will open up the tangency points to anyone who wants to change worlds?" Mack asked, rubbing his chin, on which a large purple bruise was putting in its appearance.

"Hardly." Juana dismissed this suggestion with a gesture. "It is not that simple. But any so-and-so smart enough to jump worlds without guidance or training is smart enough not to have missed my briefing yesterday in the train. Which means he'll be smart enough to know how to contact our enemies here and try to sell them our story."

"I wonder who it is—and why," mused Elspeth.

"We'll probably find out soon enough, never fear," Juana said dryly. She rose and shook down her skirt, looking absurdly little-girl-dressed-up in the process. "All right, kids, let's get set for the big act with the press."

Under the circumstances it was a considerable ordeal, but when at last it was over Juana informed Elspeth that she had played her role of visiting English poetess very well. Elspeth pushed a strand of dark blond hair back from her forehead and released a grin that had been lurking deep within her. "I never knew I was such a ham," she said. "I actually loved it."

"You use the word ham that way in your world too?" said Juana. "Funny. Do you suppose people like us carry our slang from world to world?"

"Speaking of ham—I'm hungry," said Mack, looking sullen but relieved at having got away with playing the part of Elspeth's personal secretary—which had taxed his histrionic ability to the bone.

They dined in a magnificent restaurant atop the hotel, with a panoramic view of the city and bay which far surpassed in sweep that from the window of their drawing room six floors below. Elspeth felt wide-eyed and young at the attention they drew from headwaiter and lesser servitors—with herself its focal point. Being a celebrity—even a manufactured one—had its points, she decided.

And the view was incredible. San Francisco was a great city in her

world and Mack's—but nothing like this. The tracery of lights along the bridges, the towering skyscrapers, the blaze of suburban cities across the bay . . . Breathtaking was the only word for it.

Elspeth wondered how it could be put into poetry. Surely the spectacle must have inspired thousands of versifiers in this magnificent new world—some of whom must have caught fragments of its grandeur in words and rhythm. She would like to approach it from another way, the way of infinite relative smallness.

Perhaps some early giant of legend—a giant who played among the tall sequoias like a child among saplings—might return from his wanderings to find this vast city sprawled over one of his former playgrounds, might feel dwarfed for the first time in his life. He might even—But she decided it was pretty corny.

Unexpectedly someone in a full-dress party two tables away recognized Juana and they were suddenly in the swirling center of a swarm of revelers. Elspeth found it hard to keep up with the rapid-fire chatter, the slang, the shared allusions. But Juana acquired a new glow and interpreted for them with practiced ease.

After all, as the visiting poetess from abroad, Elspeth was in character as a vague and remote creature. And Mack, as a mere secretary, was not supposed to talk, although one or two of the girls glanced at him speculatively from time to time during the ninety-odd minutes they spent as members of the party. Elspeth fell prey to a pang of jealousy and detested herself for it.

Later, back in their suite, Juana kicked off her slippers and massaged her tiny feet thoughtfully. "I speeded things up a bit there, I think," she said. "That heavy brunette is a senator's daughter and a great pal of sweet Christine. I have a hunch you'll be hearing from the gal herself by tomorrow noon."

She frowned, released her foot and reached for a cigarette. "I wish I knew for certain who pulled that hassel on the train this afternoon—even more what his contacts are—and his motives. Unless he's clever as hell it's going to take him a little time to make connections, especially since he'll be using that Columbian funny money. He might land in jail for passing the stuff, but I'm afraid that's too much to hope for."

Elspeth once again found herself thinking of Everard—as she had thought of him when she found the zabaglione missing. He was clever, he was tough, he had reason to hate Mack and herself. They had not

only wrecked his assignment, they were also menacing the war upon which his emotional and material welfare depended.

"I wonder," she began. The others looked at her expectantly and all at once she felt intuitive and foolish. "It's nothing," she told them. "Merely a zany fancy. I'm going to turn in."

They rose in midmorning and breakfasted *en trois* in the drawing room. The city beyond their window was curtained thickly with fog. It was, on the whole, an oppressive and miserable morning. Mack brooded over his attaché case like a human bulldog, and Juana and Elspeth scanned the papers. It did the poetess small inner good to find herself described as a "colorlessly incisive and typically British blonde whose conversation seems to consist chiefly of unrhymed and occasionally profane monosyllables."

"On the nose!" said Mack with a nasty chuckle when Juana read it to them. Elspeth told him, to no avail, to close his large rhinoceros mouth, and turned sulky. Mack got out his heavy pistol and checked its workings. He had the whole thing apart when the telephone rang, making them all jump.

"Miss Marriner's apartment," Juana said smoothly. She listened briefly, then winked and nodded at the others. Mack finally got his weapon reassembled with a succession of metallic clicks.

"Yes, I feel certain Miss Marriner would be honored," said Juana. "Of course she never goes anywhere without Mr. Fraser and myself . . . Fine, I do hope that won't be too inconvenient . . . Certainly. We shall be ready at four."

Hanging up, Juana put her hands on her hips and did a bump grind. "This is it, kids," she told them, grinning. "The President and sweet Christine are staying at one of those monstrous places out on the peninsula. We, it seems, are very much wanted. They're even sending a car for us at four o'clock. Yipe! What a relief! I just dropped ten years somewhere."

"Careful, child," said Elspeth. "That would put you well under the age of consent."

Juana grimaced at her, thumbed her nose at Mack and did an off-to-Buffalo into her own bedroom. "If I'm to visit the President, I'm going to be sure my seams are straight," she informed them over one shoulder.

Mack headed for his room, hesitated, then came back and poked up

the attaché case. Elspeth sat still a moment, putting her thoughts in order. She was going to have to go it alone without a single slip from here on in. All at once she was frightened—and not of Everard or Asiatic agents. This was just plain stage terror.

Four o'clock took a long time coming, but the phone rang almost on the dot with the announcement that a car was waiting downstairs to pick up Miss Marriner and staff. Mack enlisted the aid of the elevator man to tote their suitcases, but he carried the attaché case to the lift himself.

Just as the elevator doors opened in the lobby, one of the passengers, a middle-aged woman of pasty complexion, gave a groan and began to topple in a faint. Involuntarily Mack moved to help her from the elevator. At this the other passenger, a heavy-set man with a blue chin, stepped forward and, wordlessly, yanked the attaché case from Mack's startled grasp.

There followed a confused tussle, in the course of which the "fainting" woman hit the operator over the head with what seemed to a loaded umbrella, Mack slugged the heavy-set marauder, and the attaché case was bashed open.

Seconds later both heavy-set man and middle-aged woman were lost amid the crowd in the lobby, while a curious swarm blanketed the view of their flight. Standing on tiptoe, Elspeth tried to look over the tumult and follow their attackers' escape route. She caught a quick glimpse of them darting through a revolving door into the fog—while an elegant and too-familiar figure covered their retreat.

"Everard!" she cried.

Mack cursed. "The dirty bastards got away with my fuel sample," he growled. "Well, what do we do now?"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**G**ET BACK UPSTAIRS—quickly,” snapped Juana. “The Presidential car is going to have to wait.” Swearing under her breath in a monotone but with characteristic efficiency, she herded them into another elevator, brushed off dismayed hotel employees, and somehow, in less than a minute, restored them, frightened and disheveled, to the security of their suite.

“The dirty bastards really did it,” muttered Mack. He shook his head as he surveyed the wreckage of his precious attaché case and indulged in further explicit profanity. His tie was half out of sight under one wing of his collar and a button dangled from his jacket by a single thread.

“Every time—just when it looks easy,” mourned Elspeth, “it seems as if things go wrong.”

“You’ll get used to it, Elspeth,” said Juana absently. Standing in the middle of the carpet, she was biting her lower lip in deep concentration.

“Dammit!” said Mack in irate frustration. “I had a hunch the weasel meant trouble from the beginning. But if I’d known how much . . .” He shook his head and cursed again. “These loving plans are worse than useless without the fuel. And without the sample it may take them years to get it. Everard’s cooked our goose.”

“For God’s sake, stop using those tired clichés!” snapped Elspeth, whose nerves were not only on edge but their beam ends.

“Shut up—both of you,” said Juana, frowning. She had gone to the telephone and was in the process of dialing a number herself after getting an outside line from the switchboard. She had insisted upon such a phone before taking the suite.

Getting her connection, she said tersely, “Juana Brooks . . . forty-seven . . . this world . . . blue emergency.” She then gave a concise and well-organized account of what had happened—including a complete description of their two elevator attackers. She mentioned Everard, listened briefly, then looked across at Elspeth with her eyebrows lifted. “Everard,” she said. “Can you give a description?”

“You’re goddamned well right,” Mack broke in before Elspeth could assemble her thoughts. “Five-eleven. No, make it five-eleven and a half. About one-sixty—light brown hair—light blue eyes—very fair skin, almost sallow—hairline mustache on upper lip—”

"Also a bit of a swish," interrupted Elspeth, surprised at the accuracy of Mack's memory but determined not to show it. "Keeps a silk handkerchief up his left sleeve—accent very British, at least while he was with us. *And* a purple bee tattooed just behind his left ear."

"That ought to do it," said Juana, who had been repeating their words verbatim into the mouthpiece. Then, ignoring them in favor of her unseen collocutor, "Have you orders to cover the situation?" She listened for several seconds, murmured, "Got it—I understand perfectly," put the phone back on its cradle and turned to face them.

"This is a real rabbit punch and no fooling," she told them quietly, hesitated, then added, "Now here's the pitch. You two are to carry on. Get fixed up and go along in the Presidential car as we planned. Elly, play Christine Roosevelt but keep moving in on the President, every chance you get—but slowly and carefully. If you have any doubts about making a move, don't move. Arrangements are being made to put all of us up in one of the guest cottages on the estate.

"And don't forget this. When you've talked enough poetry to make Christine happy, tell her you've always wanted to meet General Curtis—you saw his picture somewhere and think he's fascinating. Try to make arrangements to meet him somewhere tomorrow where Mack and I can talk to him. Get him to come to the cottage for a drink with Christine maybe. Curtis is a red-hot guided-missile man and he is also very close to the President. If you have to, tell Christine you're mad to do a big poem about rockets and the magic of space flight. Have you got all that?"

"I think so," said Elly, working her memory overtime. Once more she was feeling like someone walking through a nightmare that simply had to come to an end soon.

"You'd better," said Juana, in whom crisp and ruthless efficiency had replaced all traces of languorous charm. Then, turning to the photographer, "Mack, I want you to give me those blueprints—but take the attaché case with you. Here, you can fill it with these." She picked up the newspapers they had been reading, handed them to him, took the precious blueprints, and stowed them away carefully in her handbag.

"And I want both of you to talk, talk, talk about the assault in the elevator as if it were utterly inexplicable. Nothing was taken, mind you. After all, why should anyone want to rob a poetess? This will focus attention on you, get you both noticed. Now beat it, both of you,

while I try to square this—and good luck.”

“But how about you, Juana?” Elspeth asked, worried.

“And how about those blueprints?” inquired Mack.

“Don’t worry, either of you. I’ll be okay,” said Juana with a serene confidence that brooked no denial. “I’ll be along later on—sometime after dinner tonight probably. You might arrange things so that I can get to the cottage without too much red tape. In the meantime, I’ll get after the disintegrator shield—whatever it is. We’re in a honey of a jam and we’ve all got to play our parts perfectly or we shan’t get out of it. Now scram!”

Once again the three of them rode down in the elevator together. Mack nursed the brief case as if it were a two-pound baby. They had still to wade through considerable confusion in the lobby—a natural aftermath of the hugger-mugger—but they managed to get outside to the waiting limousine without much trouble. There, on the sidewalk, Juana left them with a faint grin and a finger salute.

“Lordy, what a wonderful person that little girl is!” said Elspeth when they were driven smoothly out into traffic behind the broad back of an expert chauffeur.

“Ummmmm,” said Mack thoughtfully. Elspeth glanced sharply at her partner, saw that he was looking out the window in a sort of abstraction, a slight frown on his face. He added, his voice low. “She’s a lot more woman than little girl.”

“All *right!*” said Elspeth testily. “I wasn’t thinking of *that*, you old goat.”

Mack turned to give her a twisted smile. “Oddly enough,” he told her, “neither was I.”

The fog lifted with knifelike suddenness when they passed the rim of the city hills, and they drove the magnificent miles to the peninsula in a warm bath of golden afternoon sunlight. They passed smoothly through trim small towns and hamlets, through areas of broad shaven lawns and carefully landscaped greenery, caught occasional glimpses of great estates resting securely in their settings of hedges, flowers, and trees.

• “D’you know, Mack,” Elspeth said suddenly, “I think I like this world. It’s alive and imaginative—and young.”

“It’s fast, but it seems happy,” said Mack with unexpected insight. “It would be a dirty shame if it were all spoiled.”

“That simply stinking Everard,” said Elspeth. “Remember, back



in Columbia, when I said I was glad he escaped?" Then, as the photographer nodded, "I don't feel that way any more. Mack."

For the first time in her life she was beginning to learn the real meaning of personal hate. She had known dislikes, of course—some of them violent—but in general they had been of an abstract or at most inanimate nature. What she was feeling now was something utterly new to her, something she could tell she was never going to forget. And it gave her new insight into many people whose behavior had simply puzzled her before.

"Hey!" cried Mack, pulling away from her in mock alarm. "Don't bite a hunk out of *me*. I didn't steal the fuel sample. All I ever got was a smack on a very glass jaw."

"Sorry, Mack," she said. She laughed a little mirthless laugh, then forced herself to relax the muscles at the corners of her mouth. "I'm afraid I feel pretty were-wolfish about poor dear Everard. Why didn't we kill him when we had him in the Pipit?"

"That's my girl," said the photographer approvingly. "But we couldn't—then. We didn't know enough." Elspeth was still pondering this somewhat cryptic statement when the limousine stopped before a wrought-iron gate in a long brick wall, a gate which was promptly opened by an alert-looking pair of young-old men. One of them queried the driver briefly, then they were passed on through.

A quarter of a mile farther on, past more lawns, landscaped groves, and artfully cut hedges, they halted again beneath a large white portico-cochere in front of an immense porticoed mansion built in neoclassic style. There another pair of Secret Service operatives looked them over closely, after which a youthful butler in ribbed waistcoat, blue tailcoat, brass buttons and breeches came out and entered the front seat of the limousine.

On broad crushed gravel they were driven around the immense house and perhaps two hundred yards beyond it to a comparatively small white cottage, which nestled in dark cedars on a gentle bank above a shimmering blue-gray lake. Here the butler took their luggage—save for Mack's now-dummy attaché case—and ushered them into the cottage. His manner was somewhat apologetic.

"Mr. Gardienne told me to tell you that he hopes you won't mind being so far from the main house," he informed them. "But with the President's party here . . ." He paused politely to express his regret, added, "Whenever you are ready, Miss Marriner, Miss Roosevelt is

waiting to see you. You can reach the house directly by crossing the side lawn." He pointed the way and left.

"Slumming!" said Mack. "I love it!" He prowled around the low-ceiled luxuriously appointed living room with its well-equipped bar and fireplace. It was a "cottage" only by comparison with the many-elled neoclassic monster house across the lawn.

"This work does have its little compensations," said Elspeth with a sigh. Not only did the cottage boast three luxurious bedrooms, each with its own bath, but in the rear were a small dining room and serving pantry as well.

"I don't know quite why it is, but every time I get in a place like this where all I want to do is loll around I seem to have a job to do," said Mack mournfully. He sank into an armchair, put his feet up on a hassock, lit a cigarette, grinned lazily. "This time is the exception. You've got the job, boss-woman. So get on your horse and gallop off to it."

"Don't remind me," pleaded Elspeth, who was too nervous at the prospect of what lay ahead of her even to feel up to swapping insults with the photographer. She went into her bathroom, checked dress, hairdo and make-up, did what little she could, and emerged with a sigh. Mack had a quick straight drink ready for her—she noted that he had poured himself an interesting-looking highball — which she downed nervously before setting out across the side lawn to the great house.

Christine Roosevelt proved to be a complete surprise. Instead of the assured, mentally corseted young lady her poems had led Elspeth to expect, the President's daughter proved to be a tall, sensitive, rather shy girl, much younger looking than her pictures, a girl whose lack of assurance made her almost diffident during the opening gambits of their conversation.

"It was simply swell of you to come here to see me, Miss Marriner," she said after maneuvering Elspeth into what appeared to be her own private drawing room on the second floor. Around them the house was literally larded with a feeling of movement, of importance, of comings and goings and low-pitched conversations, of the presence of far more people than it had been built for or was accustomed to contain.

"I've read your poems, Miss Roosevelt," Elspeth said bluntly when they were seated over a tea tray. From memory of her own past shy-

ness she knew that the quick kindly incision was the best method of piercing the barrier between them.

"They stink, don't they?" said the President's daughter with an attack of diffidence that caused her to look away toward a lofty window hung with old-gold damask drapes.

"No, they don't stink," said Elspeth quietly and with all the sincerity she could muster. "But they aren't poetry yet."

"Oh! Do you think they ever *will* be?" Christine asked eagerly, her shyness vanishing in the face of even such negative interest. Her rather plain face was alight with sudden hope.

"That," said Elspeth, "is entirely up to you. I don't want to sound bromidic, but if you want to write poetry you've got to cut yourself loose from the world you were planted in and find or build one of your own."

"But how can I?" the girl asked almost tragically, brushing a wisp of near-silver hair back from her high narrow forehead. "I mean, being a President's daughter and all . . ." She made a hopeless little gesture. Elspeth felt a flood of sympathy for her and spoke as gently as she could and with sincerity.

"You can find your new world within yourself—you must if you are ever to find it anywhere," Elspeth told her, and then they were off. To the surprise of both of them they found they were only two years apart in age. They were still at it hot and heavy when a tall rather portly man with white hair and a face which showed intense fatigue entered the room without knocking.

"Dad!" cried Christine, rising and giving him a hug. "When did you get out of conference? I thought those Yugoslavs——"

"Old Chichi's gout acted up and they called it off," he said with a sudden and utterly infectious smile. "So I high-tailed it right out here. I got out of the conference, but I still want a drink. Just you and me, how about it, Chris?"

"But, Dad," protested his daughter. "I have Elly—Miss Marriner—here. Don't be so rude."

"Just leaving," said Elspeth, smiling and moving toward the door. The President clapped a hand over his forehead and stepped in front of her to bar her path.

"Miss Marriner, you'll have to stay if only to cover my embarrassment," he said, extending a large and friendly hand. "Are you telling my daughter how to write poetry?"

"She's tremendous, Dad," said the President's daughter. "I'll ring for a drink for all of us." She suited the action to the word. In the meanwhile the President frankly studied Elspeth.

"You look a lot better than your pictures," he told her with intonation that robbed the remark of any unkindness. A look of quick concern crossed his face. "But didn't I hear something about your being attacked in town on your way here?"

"It was nothing," said Elspeth in what she hoped was a tone bound to draw further questions. It worked, and for the next half hour she was busy explaining the incident for the two of them.

At the end of that time a secretary in striped pants entered and whispered in the President's ear. He sighed, put down his glass, said, "They've caught up with me, kids." He rose, shook hands with Elspeth, added, "Is there anything I can do to make your visit with us more pleasant?"

Elspeth gathered herself, said bluntly, "As a matter of fact, I'd like very much to meet General Curtis, if I might."

"*Et tu, Elly?*" said Christine in mock despair.

"He's a wolf," the President informed her with a smile.

"He's also the best rocketman in the world, I hear," said Elspeth. "I want to pump him dry. I'm dreadfully keen about the possibility of space flight. One of my reasons for coming here was the hope of seeing White Sands. I may base my next poem on it."

"Curt isn't much on poetry, so far as I know," said the President, "but he's really jet-propelled where rockets are concerned."

"*And* anything in skirts, slacks, or shorts," said Christine dryly. "But if you *must* meet him, Elly, I can probably arrange it."

Her brashness paid off. Not only did she meet the dark and gallant General Curtis when she went back to the big house for dinner, but she was actually seated next to him at table. To her surprise, he proved to be utterly serious when she suggested that there might be inspiration for a man's efforts to escape his planet and fly the reaches of space. His black eyes narrowed as he considered it.

"It demands poetry—and an engineering miracle," he told her. "I only hope we both get a chance to know space first-hand before we die. But we have a lot of bridges yet to cross."

"You sound awfully discouraged, General," said Elspeth with what she hoped was something approaching dimpled charm. "Perhaps, if you're not too busy, you could come to my cottage for a cocktail

before lunch tomorrow—you and Chirstine. I might be able to mix something that will help you cross those bridges."

"That, Miss Marriner, you already have," said the general with an answering smile. He looked unexpectedly youthful; only the faint weathered lines of his neck and the gray at his temples hinted at his age. He was almost too handsome, but there was steel beneath. Somewhat to her dismay, Elspeth felt herself drawn to him. She wondered if she were retrogressing to a point where she fell for anything in uniform. First Marshal Henry, now General Curtis . . .

The date was arranged with Christine after dinner. A new movie was about to be shown in the private projection room which Mr. Gardienne had had built in his basement, but before they went downstairs a servant approached Elspeth with a message on a tray. It was from Juana, asking her to come to the cottage at once.

Elspeth made her apologies, reconfirmed the morrow's date, slipped out and across the lawn. The moon was already high, and the entire magnificent estate seemed to be tipped with silver and splashed with lampblack shadows. It had been a pleasant evening, glamorous if not thrilling. Elspeth decided she was getting blasé. Interworld travel seemed to involve some very high living.

But she forgot high life once she was again with Mack and Juana. The latter was smoking a cigarette tensely, and Mack was again checking his pistol. Before explaining what had happened, Juana asked Elspeth for a report on her own activities.

"So far—excellent," she said when Elspeth had finished. "I only hope my end went half as well." She frowned, tossed her cigarette in the fireplace, and moved beyond it to a table upon which was a small leather-covered dialed box that looked something like a portable radio but was far more complex.

"I got part of the answer to the disintegrator, anyway," she went on, adjusting the dials and studying the waverings of twin needle indicators. "It seems they don't know about asbestos back in Columbia. You get used to these anachronisms of the various worlds—or think you do—and then when one turns up it surprises you anyway. The military here has a new cloth of it—woven with some sort of polarized bakelite—that will stand up to five thousand degrees Fahrenheit for a couple of minutes. It's a secret, but we ought to be able to get it in return for our rocket plus fuel."

"If we get back the fuel," said Elspeth unhappily. "I'd give a lot to know where it is."

"We know only one thing," Juana said, adjusting the dials and again studying the twin needle indicators. "Your friend van Hooten—and he seems to be the champ heel of two worlds—has not turned in the fuel sample to his new principals—as yet."

"How can you be sure?" Mack asked doubtfully.

Juana indicated the leather box with the dials. "This is a very special device," she said. "We call it the transferometer."

"What is it, Juana?" Elspeth inquired.

"It's an interworld detector of sorts," Juana told them. "I won't give you a technical explanation—I couldn't if I wanted to, kids, and, anyway, there isn't time. But each world in each tangential universe has its own atomic table. You might say that each universe exists in the gaps in the quantum rhythms of the others.

"When you undergo a transfer you are actually undergoing an atomic change. Otherwise no transfer would be possible—you'd be keyed to one world only. This transferometer can be keyed to the A-scales of any of the known worlds. They are all listed, numbered, and tabled, of course."

"I get it," said Mack, concluding the job of reassembling his pistol. "By tuning in to the world we just left, you can locate any object from that world in this one—like van Hooten, say."

"It's not quite that simple," Juana shook her head. "However, both van Hooten and the fuel sample are native to the Columbian world. And this indicator registers that fact."

"How does that help us find them?" Mack wanted to know. "If Elly has this General Muckamuck coming here tomorrow noon for cocktails we've got to have that fuel sample ready."

"Come here, Mack," said Juana, crooking a finger. "You, too, Elly." They crowded up behind her and she showed them a perpendicular white line across the chief dial. "This white line represents our location—on an axis vertical to the Earth.

"This little blob"—she pointed to a small spot of light above the center of the white line—"is this actual spot in relation to that axis. For all practical purposes, that's us right now. See how that left-hand needle is steady on center? That means we're registered correctly."

"But how does that find us Everard?" Mack inquired. "And what is the other needle indicator for?"

"That is keyed to organic substance—in this instance from the Columbian world," Juana explained. "In short—Everard."

"But the fuel sample?" said the photographer. "How—"

"The needle is not rocking back and forth," Juana explained, "which it would be if the two were separated. Now—" She pressed a button beneath the chief dial and a horizontal red line appeared, intersecting the white one. On it, too, was a blob of light, and it almost coincided with their location.

"That again is Everard," said Juana quietly.

"Mighty cute," said Mack. "How wide is its range?"

"On the needle indicators a thousand kilometers," Juana informed them simply. "On the main dial—ten."

"Then our friend must be getting warm," said Mack.

"He is," said Juana with a trace of tenseness. "We got our first fixes on him and the sample back in town and I came out here as soon as we found he was heading this way. It's my hunch he has to have both the blueprints *and* the fuel sample, or else. He is working for people a lot tougher than the Emperor now."

"What I don't get," said Mack, "is why he's lugging the fuel sample around with him."

"Obviously because he doesn't dare part with it and it's neither bulky nor heavy," Juana replied. "He has probably told them—whoever they are—that the elevator attack was a complete bust. He wants to swing the whole deal on his own. Cute cobra."

"But how can he get at us here?" Elspeth asked.

"By the lake," said Juana, nodding toward the cottage door. "He's coming in that way. He—or rather his new employers—have this estate thoroughly cased."

"Where are the blueprints?" Elspeth asked anxiously.

"Look, the lines—" Mack began, pointing at the dial.

He was interrupted by a drawling pseudo-British voice from the doorway, a voice that echoed Elspeth's question with, "Yes, darlings, where *are* the blueprints? Precisely the question I was *just* going to ask myself."

Everard, clad only in dripping shorts but wearing a heavy money belt, was standing there. And in his hand was an odd-looking bell-muzzled weapon that caused Elspeth to cry, "A disintegrator! He's got a disintegrator!"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**"YOU'RE SO** absolutely utterly right," drawled Everard. "And nothing, darlings, would please me more than to give you a demonstration, although I believe Miss Marriner has already seen the weapon in action. However, there will be no need for such a—shall we say, performance? We shall—if one of you will just put the blueprints into my hot little paw. Would you mind very much?"

He turned the vicious weapon with apparent casualness, so that its ugly disked and slotted bell muzzle pointed first at Elspeth, then at Juana. Mack he ignored, seeming confident the photographer would make no move as long as he had the women covered. Despite the Corinthian floridity of his speech, there was no mistaking the ugly purpose that lurked beneath.

Juana looked coolly at the transferometer dials, then snapped off the instrument and turned slowly to study Everard. She said without a trace of tension in her voice, "You took quite a risk, leaving your clothes across the lake. If any of the guards should happen to find them—" She shrugged prettily and added, "But I'm very glad you brought the fuel sample with you in your belt. It saves us a lot of trouble tracking it down elsewhere."

"My very dear young lady," said Everard charmingly, "the blueprints, please. I feel certain that our mutual friends here"—with a bow toward Mack and Elspeth—"have told you something of the uses and effect of this little gun I have with me."

"But of course, my dear," said Juana, mocking Everard's pseudo-English drawl and smiling her defiance of the whitening of his knuckle over the trigger. "I'm simply devastated about the space-ship blueprints, Everard—really I am. However"—she sighed prettily and reached for a cigarette—"it just so happens they are where no one—not even clever, clever you—can get them. You see, my dear, I put them in the mail—registered—this evening before coming out here to wait for you."

She lit her cigarette with steady hand, and Everard, after eyeing her narrowly while she did so, said, "Tsk, ts— a pity indeed! Then I suppose there is simply nothing to do but wait." He moved to a chair and sat down without relaxing his guard.

"It won't work, Everard," said Elspeth, coming out of the chill of fear that had held her wrapped in ice since the moment she had sighted



the Bonapartist agent and his disintegrator. "You can't stay awake that long. And you can't kill us with any hope of getting the prints. How did you get in here, anyway?"

"I swam, of course," said Everard, looking slightly bewildered at the apparent stupidity of her question. Then, catching its true meaning, he tsk-tsked again. "Oh—the guards. Heavens, how dull of me! This little dis-gun of mine took very good care of them." He patted the barrel fondly.

"When their disappearance is discovered there will be a search," said Mack ominously. His eyes had not left Everard's since the latter's dramatic entry. "You'll never survive that, and you know it. Even with that blowtorch of yours."

"Why not give up?" Juana suggested persuasively. "Turn over the fuel sample and the dis-gun to us. I have already arranged for your transfer to a world where your—er—talents will be more appreciated. Suitably equipped, of course."

Everard's face went stiff and gray and his light blue eyes glowed with what Elspeth realized, to her surprise, was fear. He said too quickly, "Oh no, not that—*never!* How do I know *what* kind of a world you'll put me on? If I had had the faintest idea, when I stowed away on the train, that you were going to—to change worlds I . . ." His voice trailed off in a sort of *ague*.

"If you had known, you wouldn't have come along?" asked the photographer, leaning forward slightly.

"Don't be absurd, my sweet," said the pseudo-Englishman with a trace of his usual bravado. "I'd have used this, of course." He again patted the barrel of the disintegrator and smiled unpleasantly. "I'd never have dreamed of letting you board the train at all. But had I used it in New Orleans I should scarcely have had a chance of making my escape."

Elspeth, shocked, gave vent to a little cry that came from somewhere deep within her. That such a young man, so obviously well educated and civilized and well bred, could be so utterly brutal toward the winning of his own selfish ends was something she still found difficult to believe. Her start caused her to knock over her handbag, which had been resting upon the right arm of her chair. Involuntarily she bent over to pick it up.

Through pure reflex action Everard's pale blue eyes darted in pursuit of her motion toward the bag on the floor. And Juana,

catlike, unerringly selected that moment to shoot through her own handbag with her efficient little automatic. The sharp *splat* of the shot, deafening in the low-ceiled room, drowned the more sickening thud of the steel-jacketed slug striking human flesh as it tore its way through Everard's bare torso.

Her full lips tightly compressed, Juana fired a second time, and again her aim was accurate. Jarred and numbed by the impact of the bullets, Everard swung his arm wildly toward the redhead, lifting the disintegrator as he did so. Mack leaped forward from his chair with a savage growl of fury and flung himself full length at the vicious intruder.

He crashed into Everard with the clean impact and ferocity of a jungle panther, rolling the chair in which the Columbian sat clean over on its back and jamming his victim against the wall beyond it. The sinister-looking disintegrator described a slow arc in the air and hit the carpet with a dull *thock*. On hands and knees, Elspeth scrambled for it and picked it up.

Straightening, she looked around her at a scene of utter horror. Everard was half sitting, half lying on the floor against the far wall, beyond his overturned chair, his eyes glazed and dull. Blood was welling in a double cascade from the twin holes in his chest, and there was a lesser cascade trickling down his chin from the corner of his mouth.

Mack, still growling like an enraged wild animal, was busily wrenching the heavy money belt from around Everard's waist, ignoring the blood. The photographer was apparently unaware of something that registered on Elspeth with the impact of a blow to the face. Juana—Juana wasn't.

A portion of the base of her chair was still there, sheared off cleanly, the surface shining with a glossy reflection that was almost like porcelain, as if it had been suddenly subjected to heat so intense that the wood itself was transformed. Against the wall beyond was an odd brown stain. Elspeth had a sudden sickening memory of a similar stain on the sidewalk outside of Bienville House in the Columbian Baton Rouge.

Mack rose, the money belt in his hands, turned slowly and, following Elspeth's horrified stare, saw what had happened. He looked at the disintegrator in Elspeth's trembling hands, then back to where

Juana had been sitting seconds before. Elspeth nodded, herself unable to speak.

The photographer turned slowly back to the dying Everard, a look of thoughtful speculation on his face. Then, carefully, he took a step backward and, moving in like a football player, booted him with all of his force, square in the middle of his classic features. "I only wish the sonuvabitch could feel it," he said.

Elspeth found herself in hearty emotional agreement with the photographer and felt only the briefest of qualms at her own brutality. She sank into the chair behind her and covered her face to shut out the ghastly sight of that porcelain chair stump and the brown stain on the wall.

There were many running footsteps outside a few moments later, and Elspeth looked up reluctantly to see a quartet of plainclothesmen and a couple of uniformed army officers in the doorway. She let Mack do the talking this time. She still couldn't speak.

"This bastard," said Mack, nodding toward Everard's shattered body, for the Columbian was dead by this time, "was the leader in that attack on us in the hotel lobby this afternoon. Elly—Miss Marriner—spotted him then." He went on to explain that van Hooten must have swum the lake after eliminating a couple of guards on the far side, that he had entered the cottage carrying his incredible new weapon, had rayed Miss Brooks to atoms after being shot by her.

"There's Juana—Miss Brook's pistol on the floor by the chair she was sitting in," he concluded, nodding toward where it lay on the carpet, sliced cleanly in half, like her handbag near it, by the disintegrating ray. "As for our visitor's weapon—Miss Marriner is holding it."

Things happened with tumbling haste after that. The transferometer had been destroyed by Everard's blast at Juana, so Mack and Elspeth did not have to attempt to explain either that fantastic instrument or its uses. But when it was discovered that two guards on the opposite side of the lake had vanished without trace or explanation, when the disintegrator was closely examined, when Everard's clothing was found neatly folded and hidden beneath a bush close to the edge of the water—then they began to be believed.

"It seems very strange to me that you, of all people, should have been selected as the target for this fantastic attack, Miss Marriner." It was a Major Leach of Army Intelligence talking. "I don't mean to

decry either your poetry or its literary value, but it is hardly of a nature to incite violence. Really, it doesn't make sense."

"Of course it doesn't, Major," said Elspeth frankly. She had managed to battle her way back to something like full rationality and self-control by forcing herself to remember that Juana had given her life to enable the two of them to complete their assignment. Now, of course, it was up to them both to make sure that the little redhead had not tossed away her life in vain.

So she added, evenly, "This attack tonight—coming on the heels of the hotel raid this afternoon—has merely precipitated things."

"What sort of things, Miss Marriner?" It was a soft-voiced lynx-eyed Secret Service inspector who asked this question.

Elspeth went on to explain that she had been sent to San Francisco on a secret mission of vital importance, that she had already arranged to reveal at least a portion of it to General Curtis on the morrow, in company with the President's daughter. She suggested that it was imperative that she and Mack see both General Curtis and the Chief Executive as soon as possible.

"They sure do things different on the other side," she overheard one of her questioners mutter in an aside. "Imagine—a poet—and a she-poet at that! Well, judging from that dis-disin—that whatever it is, she's sure onto something. Wonder how many of the damn things the Commies have?"

"I can answer that," said Elspeth quite calmly. "None. The one van Hooten had tonight was stolen from us. However, I'm glad to be able to turn it over to you. You'll find it—effective—if used wisely. If not, it means all-around ruin."

After this there followed what seemed to Elspeth an interminable wait. However, by the hands of a small gilt banjo clock on the wall of the anteroom where they were held, it was still short of eleven o'clock in the evening when she and Mack were ushered under guard into a room assigned to the President.

He was standing in front of an unlaid fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back, his regard frankly questioning, thoughtful, polite. In the room with him were only two other persons—Christine and General Curtis. The general was examining the disintegrator, shaking his head as if he could not quite believe it.

"It is my understanding that you wish to see us—on matters quite different from those you discussed with my daughter this afternoon,"

President Roosevelt said quietly. Then he smiled. "And from what I have been told just now, I have a feeling we are just as anxious to see you—or at least, by their actions, our mutual enemies seem to feel so."

"Mr. President," said Elspeth directly, "what would you say if we were to put in your hands the means and techniques for mastering space—not ten years from now, not one—but just as soon as you can build both vessel and fuel according to tested specifications we can supply you?"

"I'd say—I'd have to say that I'm very much afraid I cannot believe you," the President told her. He turned to lift an eyebrow at General Curtis. "Right, Curt?"

"Five minutes ago I'd have gone along with you, sir," said the general, still studying the Columbian weapon. "After looking this thing over I'm at least willing to listen. But I'd like to know why *we're* getting the break—if we *are* getting it. I'd like to hear more about that."

"My secretary, Mr. Fraser," said Elspeth, nodding toward Mack, "has with him, thanks to the permission of your staff, a sample of the type of fuel that will make space flight not only possible but economical—comparatively cheap. It was stolen from us in the hotel attack this afternoon, but, thanks to the fact that the agent who stole it kept it on him, was recovered when he raided the cottage this evening.

"Miss Brooks"—for a moment her voice wavered as she thought of that gay, buoyant many-sided loveliness so utterly and ruthlessly eradicated—"Miss Brooks, in view of the earlier attack in the hotel, had already sent the space-ship blueprints and specifications from San Francisco by registered mail before she—was murdered. She did not have time to tell us to whom the package was addressed, but presumably it was sent either to herself or one of us. At any rate, knowing her, I know the package will arrive."

"Let's have a look at this miracle fuel, Fraser," said General Curtis, stepping forward, the disintegrator still in one hand. He extended the other and without a word Mack handed him the packet. After receiving a wave to go ahead from the President, the general retired to a far corner of the room to unwrap it and scan the printed material it contained.

"Don't pretend to understand any of this, Elly," said Christine, coming forward and taking both her hands, "but I know you're a very wonderful person. You can't have done anything wrong."

"Thanks, Chris, I haven't—not in this business at any rate," said

Elspeth. Then, sadly, "But you had no chance to meet the only really wonderful one among us. It was Juana Brooks who put the whole thing over."

"Would any of you care for a drink?" inquired the President, moving toward a portable bar. "I know I would."

Mack stepped in quickly to relieve the Chief Executive of the mixing and serving duties, and Elspeth and Christine Roosevelt sat down on a sofa together, talking trivialities in spurts. It was a time of waiting for all of them, a time during which each was lonely despite the presence of the others.

Suddenly General Curtis gave vent to what sounded like an Indian war whoop. He jumped out of his chair and lifted his arm high as if to hurl to the carpet the papers he had been reading. "Of all the complete and utter damned foolishness!" he shouted. He might almost have been doing a war dance in his frustration.

"Something wrong, General?" President Roosevelt asked sharply.

"I should say so—sir," said the general, regaining a measure of self-control. "Only what's wrong is all of us! Do you know what this is, sir? It's a method—not only instructions but a sample—of making atomic fuel out of plain sodium! Furthermore, it defines a way of polarizing and shielding a sodium drive just about forever. And what's more, sir, without even testing this sample I'll lay a hundred to one it will work. Where have our great minds been? What have they been *doing* in their damned labs?"

"Good lord!" said the President, sinking slowly into a chair. He passed a hand over his brow, stared curiously at Elspeth, then at Mack. "I don't suppose," he said almost wistfully, "that you could tell us more about this? You and it didn't come out of thin air, did you?"

"Hardly, Mr. President," said Elspeth in response to both questions. "But we do want something from you." She was conscious of Mack's approving gaze as she put in her request for a heat-ray shield. Before the President could answer, General Curtis, who had been listening with keen attention, broke in:

"I was wondering, sir, why Miss Brooks' handbag—or what was left of it—contained some of the formulas for our new antinapalm fabric. So were the Secret Service." He turned to Elspeth, added, "You mean the shield will work against *that*?" nodding at the disintegrator, which he had put down on a table.

"That was our understanding," said Elspeth quietly. She knew that

none of this could be real, that she was simply walking through her allotted dream paces. "Please, we need it. It's vitally important. If we don't get it, Miss Brooks will have died for nothing."

General Curtis spent the next half hour studying the disintegrator, then the fuel formulas, then staring hard at the far wall, rubbing his chin, while the others waited for his decision. Finally he looked at the President and said, "Damned if I don't think it might work at that—pending verification by our scientists, of course. *Brother!* Am I going to show up those long-hairs with this stuff!"

"Then you think we can let them have what they want?" the President asked hopefully.

"I don't see why not, if these space-ship specifications and blueprints pan out," he said. "Confidentially, I'm glad to have an antidote for this damned disintegrator. It's something like our new super flama throwers, but a hell of a lot more effective. Now, sir, with your permission I'd like a drink."

The following morning—none of them went to bed that night—the blueprints arrived, and again General Curtis spent his time being torn between admiration for the Reed Weston ship and chauvinistic self-reproach over the backwardness of American scientists. It was on his recommendation that afternoon that President Roosevelt, in one of the greatest gambles of history, told the Congress of Nations assembled in the presidio that the United States at last had the secret of space flight within its grasp, that the road to the planets would soon be open for human expansion.

"It will not be an easy road," he told them. "The road of the pioneer has never been easy. It may prove to be an impossible road, although, from information I now have, this I do not believe. Man will conquer whatever he must—no matter how alien, how vast, how puny, how fearsome or how difficult it may be. Sometime, perhaps when he has won the stars, he may even conquer himself.

"Furthermore," he went on, his voice rising magnificently, "as soon as we have completed certain experiments now successfully under way, we shall turn our information over to the United Nations to be shared by all who would share the planets."

Elsbeth, sitting in a special seat in the balcony, barely felt the tap on her shoulder. She jumped, turned, smiled up at Mack and General Curtis. Mack said, "Come on, Elly. We're on our way to White Sands.

"You wouldn't want to miss the finale?"

They were driven to a vast airport on an artificial island in the bay under one of the amazing bridges. There they were bundled into a vast and deadly looking army jet transport, which resembled nothing they had seen on either their own or the Columbian world.

It took off with a shattering roar that soon faded to a faint scream, more felt than heard as it reached supersonic speed. Southeast they sped, over the towering Coast Range and the even loftier Rockies beyond, scaling the snowcapped mountain barriers with almost insolent ease. Elspeth felt almost as if they were already in space. She said as much to Mack, who was sitting beside her.

"It takes seven miles a second to get clear of Earth," he told her pedantically. "That's four hundred and twenty miles a minute. I doubt if we're doing much over twelve miles a minute—if that. Still," he conceded, "that's moving right along for turbines."

"Mack!" she said and to her surprise she found that her hand had somehow crept into his big near fist. "Mack, I'm scared without Juana. I feel like—oh, I don't know—I feel lost. How are we supposed to get out of this world without her?"

"I know what you mean, Elly," he told her with what she supposed was meant to be comfort. "I feel the same way, of course. If we're stuck, we're stuck, though, and it's a good thing we've both got plenty of jobs and connections ready-made. Still, it isn't our world." He paused, frowned, patted her hand.

"But somehow I don't think they'll leave us here," he concluded. "They seem much too well organized."

"But how will we know whoever comes for us?—if they do send someone," Elspeth asked. She knew she was being a fine old panic-bag, but she couldn't help it. She had to voice her fears, unbottle them. "How do we know it won't be another Everard?"

"We don't," Mack said harshly, and all at once his eyes were shadowed and the lines around his mouth deeper. "But if another Everard does turn up and we spot him this time, we'll know what to do with him."

"Juana knew all the ropes—was always in touch," said Elspeth. "We're like Hansel and Gretel—babes in the woods!"

"She knew the ropes," said Mack. "If we're going on with this we'll have to learn them, that's all, Elly. You'd better try to get some sleep." He lowered his shoulder to support her head.



Somehow she did manage to sleep while the big plane cut across Nevada, across Arizona, across part of New Mexico. She was aroused by a sudden move on the part of Mack, and opened her eyes to find him leaning across her to peer out the window. The plane was banking in a sharp turn as it prepared to make a landing.

Below them was spread an amazing spectacle. It was desert—desert as far as the eye could reach—desert like portions of the classic Sahara, with little hills and dunes and ridges that looked like the ripples in some vast sea of sand.

But there were men here too, and the marks of men were upon the desert. Elspeth saw square mile after square mile of buildings—low, long, efficiently laid out. Barracks, houses, shops, hospitals, even churches—acre upon acre of glass-roofed workshops. The streets were aligned with geometric precision, and upon them crept small black bugs that must be automobiles.

Close by the desert city was its airport. Its hangars and landing strips looked oddly nonobjective after the neatness of the city itself. And some miles beyond the airport could be seen the still vaster launching grounds, extending far into the dusk.

"It reminds me of Norman in Columbia," Elspeth told Mack.

"Not much," said Mack. "They have the plant here, but they haven't got the ship. *We're* bringing them that." There was a certain fierce pride in his speech and it found ready echo in her heart. Come what might, they were delivering the goods for Juana.

"Enjoy the trip?" General Curtis was bending over them. He had spent most of the journey forward in the pilot's compartment. Elspeth suspected he had been doing the bulk of the flying.

"Wonderful!" Elspeth told him, and Mack nodded.

"Better belt in—we're landing," he told them. Then, "Word just got here that some big-shot scientist from New York will be here to meet us—or rather you, Mack. He wants to talk to you about this sodium fuel of yours."

"I'm no nuclear physicist—hell, I'm no physicist at all," said Mack. "But I *have* seen the stuff work. I'll do what I can."

Elspeth had one of her psychic hunches as she fastened her broad-webbed belt about her waist. That scientist from New York meant something special—what, she didn't know, or why—but she did know that he was going to be important to them. She steeled herself for any sort of surprise.

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But she was totally unprepared for the surprise she got on landing. The chunky bespectacled "big-shot scientist from New York"—the man who came forward to greet them with a pleasant smile on his face—was none other than Orrin Lewis, her editor and Mack's back in their own world, the man who had sent them on the original assignment to the Hatteras Keys for *Picture Week*.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**"SO WHEN** the bad news about Juana came through last night I thought I'd better transfer over to get you two out of this," said "Dr." Orrin Lewis, regarding Mack and Elspeth owlishly over the top of his highball. It was early evening, and they were relaxing in the living room of the small frame house that had been assigned them on "Scientists' Row."

"Incidentally, this is one of the goddamnedest of all the worlds I have ever visited," the editor went on, his broad low forehead furrowed with thought. "I don't do much transferring any more—getting too old for it—and it's my first visit here." He paused, looked at his glass, then shook his head. "What a monumental pyramid of paradoxes!" he exclaimed.

"They have more so-called peace organizations than any other world in this stage of development, and yet they manage to fight more wars. They have more medicine and doctors and hospitals—and a lot more sickness. They have more religions and church members—and more damned sinners."

"Don't the last two usually walk hand in hand?" Elspeth asked her employer.

"*Touché!*" said Orrin Lewis, smiling. "Both are symptoms of the same sickness, I suppose. Well, we're giving them an outlet to the planets. That ought to take care of some of their excess energy. I'm telling you youngsters, this one's a real problem."

"And when the planets have been exhausted?" Mack inquired.

"Who knows? We're at a tangent here, of course. We'll have to follow developments in both worlds—and on other tangents."

"The job is endless, isn't it?" said Elspeth thoughtfully.

"Endless!" said Orrin Lewis.

"And it was through you that we got into this," said Elspeth.

"That's a big part of my job—selecting recruits. They are always teamed on early assignments. Later, like Juana, they learn to work alone or with other teams as the need arises. I don't mind telling you she's one we're going to miss."

"Amen," said Mack unexpectedly but sincerely.

"Tell me," said the girl to Lewis, "what happens if a person on one world meets her—or his—counterpart on another?"

"That's bothered me too," said Mack.

"It does happen," said Lewis. He smiled at Elspeth. "For instance, Elly, there's a *you* on this world. You're a very famous expatriate poetess in London."

"Then that book of poems was *hers* as well as mine?" Elspeth was shocked. Her poetry was so definitely a part of *her*—of whatever *this* Elspeth Marriner was. But Orrin Lewis shook his head.

"No, parallels simply don't run that close," he told her. "We had your verses specially printed for Christine Roosevelt. I took care of that little job myself."

"May I ask how Mack and I happened to be picked for this work—this job?" she asked. Mack's eyes echoed her curiosity.

"You have a right to know," said the editor. He paused, obviously marshaling his thoughts, then said, "Our ideal transferee must be young—only a strong young personality could hope to survive the sudden shifts, not to mention the dangers. Then we *must* have integrity—and then a certain breadth of view and adaptability. Beyond that we select specific people for specific jobs.

"Both of you, for instance, are young. Both of you have integrity. Mack, you tend to be a bit unmalleable at times. Elspeth, you too much so. You complement one another very well, which 's one reason we always send our neophytes out in pairs. You either quickly acquire the qualities you lack in this business or you don't last long.

"To handle both the Columbian problem and this one we needed someone with at least a knockabout experience in applied science. You have that, Mack. And to reach President Roosevelt we needed a poetess to get at him through his daughter—that was your special attraction Elly. Frankly, I think you've both done damned well.

"And now I've got to turn in." He rose, looked at his watch, put down his glass. "We'll be leaving early tomorrow. We're flying to the Topeka transfer point. There we part company, but a pickup has been arranged to get you to Reed Weston." He paused, added, "Incidentally, *Picture Week* will be expecting a damned good feature on the Hatteras Keys. You are to return to Spindrift Key as soon as your work in Columbia is concluded. And that about winds it up."

"I've got a question, Orry," Mack said stoutly. "I want to know why it's so important to doctor up these other worlds."

"You have, Mack," said Orrin Lewis, "with your almost infallible super-simplicity put your well-grimed forefinger upon the very crux of the question."

"Hub?" said Mack, looking blank.

"He means you hit the nail on th thumb," said Elspeth.

"Correct," stated Orrin Lewis. "It so happens that if any of the tangential worlds is irretrievably damaged—or destroyed—it will have a cataclysmic effect upon the entire quantum fabric which holds the various universes in a statis of sorts.

"If this world, for instance, should manage to blow itself up it would leave a gap in the fabric of existence itself—a gap whose filling would jar the devil out of each of the myriad other worlds that co-exist with it. You know how thunder works. It's a vague analogy, but roughly the same. It is the job of the Watchers and their aides to see to it that no such catastrophe occurs."

"It's almost terrifying," murmured Elspeth, thinking about the magnitude of the entire scheme.

"Terrifying? It's a job," said the editor reassuringly. "Once again, I'm expecting a damned good picture story about the keys. I still have to answer to the publisher, you know."

"You'll get it—won't he, Elly?" said Mack, and Elspeth felt grateful for the photographer's expressed confidence in her.

Lewis looked at them thoughtfully, said, "Be on your toes. Your job here is not yet done. And, Mack, have you been taking pictures?"

"A few," said the photographer, reddening a little. "I've been pretty busy in other directions, Orry."

"Well, take all you can from now on," Lewis told him. "If the film here is useless in your camera, get a new camera. The Watchers need all the records they can get. Got enough money?"

"Juana held the purse," said Elspeth, suddenly realizing that they were virtually broke. Orrin Lewis drew out a bulging wallet, tossed a fat sheaf of alien bills on the table in front of him. "This ought to cover any and every emergency you run into," he told them, then looked thoughtfully at nothing and added, "If the two of you together ever become as good as Juana Brooks was alone you'll—well, you'll both be doing more than your jobs. Good night—and good luck."

He turned abruptly and left them, but not before Elspeth caught a glimpse of the mist on his spectacles. Mack stood there, looking at the glass in his hand. Suddenly he hurled it into the stone fireplace, listened to its final tinkle before turning away. He was a little unsteady as he walked toward his own bedroom.

Elspeth, for once, knew enough to keep her mouth shut. But there

were tears trickling down her cheeks as she gathered up the money Orrin Lewis had left for them, folded it carefully and stowed it safely away in the purse in her handbag. After all, if Mack couldn't take care of practical things, someone was going to have to. . . .

Orrin Lewis woke them early, yet they had barely time for a single cup of coffee before they were driven in a jeep to the airfield, where a sleek swept-back air force plane awaited them, already warmed up. They made Topeka Airport in amazingly rapid time, there transferred to another motor vehicle, which drove them to the station, where they boarded the last car after bidding farewell to the editor.

It was no luxurious private car this trip, but a smelly old coach of unfamiliar design. Shortly after noon their car was uncoupled after being shunted onto a siding, and they waited alone together for what they knew was coming. It was bright sunlight until the blackness came, but when it came it was just as dark as before.

"I'll never get used to it," said Elspeth when it was over.

"Me neither," said Mack, whose grammar, under the impact of engineer argot of three worlds, was becoming noticeably mongrel. He looked at her and by his eyes she knew that again he was aware of her. Somehow the fact pleased her, although she knew her thoughts should be turning toward the black marshal awaiting her at Reed Weston's headquarters.

They were picked up above Natchez this time by a Weston armored patrol and driven at breakneck speed to Norman. There the black marshal had only time for a quick grin and hug—they were in Weston's office when they met, were not alone.

He said, "Lordy, I'm happy you're back, honey. You just made it by hours. What happened to my secretary?"

"She was disintegrated—by van Hooten. He's dead too," Elspeth said dully, her happiness in seeing and touching Marshal Henry fading before the memory mention of Juana recalled.

"I'm sorry," said John Henry, and somehow, in his deep voice, the simple phrase meant more than the most florid expression of sympathy on the part of any other. Then, straightening, he said grimly, "But if she helped bring back a shield for the disintegrator, I'll see to it myself that she didn't die in vain."

"She was the whole show," said Elspeth miserably, feeling close to tears now that letdown was upon her.

"I've got to run a test immediately," the black marshal told her gently, sensing her mood. He lifted her chin, smiled down at her, added, "When this is over things are going to be different."

"I know," she replied in a near whisper. He did not, she thought, know *how* different they were going to be.

The test of the shield fabrics they had brought back with them from San Francisco was run off and proved successful beyond all hope. And two mornings later, shortly after nine, a Reed Weston air cavalcade took off for New Orleans in four Pipits—shining new copies of the original little vehicle that had brought Mack and Elspeth to Spindrift Key.

Mack was flying one of them, which contained Reed Weston and two of the scientists who had planned to accompany him into space. Marshal Henry himself flew the second, which carried rebel high brass. The pilot who had flown Mack and Elspeth to Natchez flew the third, which contained more brass. Elspeth handled the fourth, which held the three leading legal lights of the rebel entourage.

All of them, Elspeth noted, were clad in simple khaki uniforms—with shirts open at the neck and decorations and insignia of rank held to a minimum. Elspeth herself, at Marshal Henry's behest, was similarly attired.

"This—is rather fun, isn't it?" the gray-haired and utterly eminent jurist sitting beside her said, relaxing the death grip on his brief case as they leveled off at altitude.

"You were going to Mars—and you let a little flight like this bother you," giped Elspeth to put all of them more at ease. "We'll be landing in New Orleans by eleven o'clock."

"It's—it's a matter of getting used to the idea," said another legal light from the rear seat. "It's so new."

"Relax and enjoy it," said Elspeth. "The water's fine."

It was a perfect sunny day and their altitude made the heat unnoticeable. They flew in a loose diamond formation southeast to the Mississippi, then followed the densely populated course of the great brown river toward the capital, cutting bird-fashion across curve and bayou in direct line.

They landed according to plan at ten fifty-five in the vast plaza in front of the Capitol at the western terminus of the great moving boulevard that was Canal Street. Immediately an honor guard of khaki-clad



Weston men, who had entered New Orleans in advance according to treaty agreement, moved up in a hollow square to surround the four Pipits. They were, Elspeth noted, heavily armed.

The party that had flown down lined up in front of their Pipits, and Elspeth, looking around her, found herself dazzled by the splendor of the pageantry in the plaza. It was far and away the most brilliant military spectacle she had ever seen.

Imperial and Columbian leaders, in red, in blue, in green, in yellow, in white, their uniforms encrusted with gold and silver braid, buttons, medals and ribbons, cast coruscating reflections as they stood in an immense cluster in the sunlight on the Capitol steps. It was like some great review of Napoleonic times. Come to think of it, Elspeth realized, there *was* a Napoleon involved.

On one side of the square a Columbian honor guard was lined up in toy-soldier array—their lavender uniforms almost matching in magnificence those of their superiors on the steps. Opposite them an Imperial escort was aligned—equally gorgeous in scarlet. Behind them, fenced off by a double cordon of soldiery and police, were the people. Hundreds of thousands of them crowded against the barrier of the guards, other tens of thousands clustered in windows or on rooftops.

At first, as she compared the casual khaki of her own group with that incredible panoply on all sides of them, Elspeth felt ill at ease. But when the deep-throated roar of the multitude rose as they spotted Reed Weston's carrot top, when it went on endlessly and rose until it threatened to crush her eardrums, she realized how shrewd the Weston folk had been.

In that glaring heat the workmanlike simplicity and comfort of their costumes provided a contrast to the pomp that surrounded them that no competing fuss, feathers, and gold could possibly have done. Catching Mack's eye in the second rank beside her, Elspeth shouted on sudden hunch, "Was this Juana's idea?"

He nodded and replied, "On the nose, Elly. Told me she got it from something that happened a few years ago on a battleship back in her own world. Don't they look hot and droopy in all those stiff collars and junk?"

Juana, Elspeth decided, might have rated herself a mere messenger girl and visiting-fireman entertainer, but she suspected that the dark beauty must have been a lot more important. The heat of the plaza

pavement seemed to undulate in waves as the little Weston party walked slowly across it toward the Capitol steps.

From then on things became a bit confused for Elspeth. She stood by in a sort of dream while interminable speeches were made by all important parties concerned. She got an impression of President Wilkinson, tall, sallow, unwholesome, accompanying his address of concession with awkward little gestures—the word “surrender” had been scrupulously avoided by all parties.

She recalled later seeing some woman—a mere inhuman black speck—fall from a window high in a building on one side of the plaza. She remembered Reed Weston, incisive and assured in his moment of triumph; the Mexican Emperor, a plump red-faced little man, making extravagant motions with his arms as he spouted a rapid-fire string of Spanish words in a near-soprano.

And she would always remember Marshal Henry, calm, assured, deep-voiced, natural, the greatest idol of them all to the assembled hundreds of thousands. What he said she could not hear, thanks to her position in back of the speakers. But even so she could sense the quiet confidence of the black marshal in the reactions of the immense horde he was addressing.

Later—much later—she had a brief moment alone with him. It was in some sort of a conservatory off the main ballroom in which a huge peace party was at its height. In some way he managed to have her brought there, to have the doors guarded by trusted aides. Her hands seemed to fly automatically into his, to lose themselves in his great strength.

“Elly,” he said, and his deep voice was a trifle husky from the strains of the day, “Elly, is it true you are leaving us?”

She tried to speak but could not, for emotion was high within her. She could only bite down hard on her lower lip and nod.

“But why?” he asked her. “Why, when we are just beginning?”

“I have to,” she said, and speech, rediscovered, came with a gush. “I know I shouldn’t tell you, but I know you’ll keep it a secret always. I’m not from this world at all—neither is Mack nor the Pipit nor was Juana. We came from somewhere else to help you, and now we have to leave for still another world. We’re just like you—under orders.”

“You’re feeling all right?” he asked her anxiously. “The heat, the excitement, the——”

“Dammit, I’m fine except that I feel horrible!” She almost shouted

at him. "Don't you know what parallel time-tracks are?"

"Parallel time-tracks?" he looked startled, incredulous, then almost frightened in turn. Finally he nodded slowly. "Yes, Elly, I think I do—in theory at any rate."

"But it's not theory—it's *true!*" she wailed and burst into tears against the vast armor of his chest.

Elspeth felt an odd end-of-the-world sensation as she and Mack trudged up the path together to the lovely old mansion atop the gentle rise and were ushered by the hound-faced butler into the platinaed study, where Mr. Horelle, looking more like alabaster than ever, still sat behind his ancient desk.

He greeted them with a smile of genuine warmth. "You have done extremely well. The other Watchers and I are more than satisfied—we might even say we are proud of your work," he told them. "In time you will more than make up for our tragic loss." He was referring to Juana and both of them knew it. But this was the only reference he made to the girl of whom he had obviously been so fond. He was a very old and a very wise man, who kept his many memories locked within himself.

He queried them about their adventures, eyed Mack's pictures—especially of the Mars—with keen interest through bifocal glasses that seemed continually to be slipping down the thin bridge of his nose. It was not until after dinner, a simple but perfect meal of red-snapper soup, filets of turkey, and fruit, that Elspeth asked him a question which had been troubling her increasingly of recent weeks.

"Mr. Horelle," she said, "I feel as though we have, with luck and the help of the Watchers, been of some aid to two other worlds. But what about our own? It has its share of problems."

"In fulfilling your assignment," he told them, "as magnificently as you both have, you have helped all worlds. But surely you know the answer to your own question. What is the chief problem of your world at present?"

"Our population is outstripping our ability to produce the goods they need for decent living," said Elspeth, frowning. "But, Mr. Horelle, I'm afraid I don't see how any of the——"

"Got it!" cried Mack. "Elly, those assembly lines, those super factories, that mass production, those interchangeable parts Curtis

told me about on his world—if they aren't the answer I'll eat my infrared camera for dessert."

"I hardly think you'll be threatened with any such gastric calamity," said Mr. Horelle, smiling through his white beard at the photographer's quick enthusiasm. "Of course that's the answer." He paused, looked keenly from one to the other of them, registering the maturity, the growth, the other changes his wisdom read.

"Yet I think you may find that you have brought back with you something even more important," he went on. "Something vastly more personal, of course. That again you must learn for yourselves."

Elspeth slept soundly that night between soft Irish linen sheets. And when she awakened she knew that she had been transferred again. Her surroundings remained the same—apparently this old house and its Key were unaffected by transfers—but she could sense it in herself. Perhaps her subconscious retained a memory of the darkness. At any rate, she *knew*.

Mack knew it too. He said nothing about it at breakfast but she had become too closely attuned to the photographer during the months just past not to sense much of what he thought and felt without need for words. They were lingering over cigarettes when a pert young housemaid came in and informed them that their boat was waiting at the pier. Elspeth found herself wondering from what world the young girl came.

The sunlight was fresh and bright outside. There was dew on the grass and the birds were singing and the insects just commencing their diurnal chants. She and Mack strolled slowly down to the wharf and there was Corey awaiting them with his smelly old power fisherboat. "Told you I'd come back for you," he said with a twitch of the lips that apparently passed for a smile. "Took you quite some while, though. Have an interesting time?"

"You have no idea, Corey!" Elspeth told him. Seconds later they were putt-putting out toward the point around which lay the little Carolina town. It was their own world and the poetess felt a great sense of peace and security wrap itself around her.

Even the ugly town itself looked beautiful. It was good to see the highway sign at the head of the pier with its crown and lion and unicorn; it was good to see the local constable in his round-topped bobby's helmet, gnawing his mustache ends as he stood, thumbs in belt, in

front of the local green-grocer's shop. It was good to know that she was back in a world in which what had briefly been the United States of America was now a vital segment of the benevolent British Commonwealth of Nations.

"A President is all very well," said Mack as they walked toward the garage, bags in hand, "but I'll take Queen Bess. It's more—permanent somehow."

"I know," Elspeth replied. "I liked President Roosevelt, but still, he lacked something our Queen has. It's hard to define."

"Right. And that little man they had between the two Roosevelts" said Mack, "what was his name?—Schuman, Crewman? Imagine a man with those shirts in charge of such a great country!"

"It wasn't either of those, but it rhymed with them," said Elspeth, frowning. She shrugged and gave it up, glanced at Mack, saw that he had stopped dead at the garage door. Following his gaze, she saw that, by some interworld magic, the Pipit was back.

It was wearing a number of dents and bruises that had not been present at the start of its journey to the Columbian world. But it was wearing them proudly, as it should. The garageman came up, looking relieved. "Scared me near out of my wits," he told them. "First the car disappears, then you folks do. And then, blimey, back she comes—and so do you! Well, all's well that ends well, I always say. She's fit as a fiddle; just needs a coat of paint. I ain't had time to give her that. Your bill, sir."

Mack slung their gear into the back, paid off the baffled garageman, who was still scratching his head when they drove out onto the lumpy main street. Corej, who was approaching the bar-restaurant in which their adventure had begun, waved a vigorous farewell as they drove past him.

Out of town, Mack took the Pipit up and they flew along the east air-traffic lane toward New York. Illogically Elspeth found herself filled with sudden nostalgia for the cure-all tooth powder of Columbia, for Marshal John, for Christine Roosevelt, for the dramatic hills and bridges of San Francisco.

She glanced covertly at Mack, saw that his eyes, too, held a faraway look. She knew of whom he was thinking, had too much respect for the subject of his grief to interrupt it. She wondered if he or anyone would ever grieve for her so deeply.

"Wonder what old Horelle meant last night when he said we'd got

something more personal out of it," the photographer said.

"The same thing Orrin was talking about that first night at White Sands," she said. "Integrity."

Mack uttered a short, sharp, and very masculine curse word. But integrity was there, had always been there, in his face. Perhaps it was now a trifle more pronounced. Elspeth smiled silently to herself at the physical intimacy Mack's curse word had implied. His using it in her presence, even unconsciously, meant a great deal. The bond was already forged between them, whether he knew it or not.

"Think you can write Orry a decent story to go with my Key pictures?" he asked.

"I think so," she said with quiet confidence. "I wonder where he'll send us next."

"You and me both," said Mack, and with a sudden swift pang Elspeth thought of Juana and her surmise that perhaps such agents as they might carry their slang from world to world.

**THE END**

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